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### *Crises, 'Creative Destruction' and the Global Power and Communication Orders*

**Paper title:** "Social media, online activism and government control in Kazakhstan"

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on the role of online social media and activism in political processes and political participation in Kazakhstan. It uses as a case study the civic conflict in the town of Zhanaozen in 2011 and the engagement of netizens as bloggers in the subsequent events.

The research of this paper is based on fits within the context of online social activism that has been used recently as a new tool for social and political activism in countries like Egypt, Russia, Syria and China which were and some still are driven by authoritarian regimes. Traditional forms of public mass communication are now challenged by internet-based communications worldwide. The internet provides new channels for citizen voices, expression of minority viewpoints, and political mobilisation (Etling, Kelly, Faris & Palfrey, 2010). In countries with restricted media freedom, blogs, online forums, *Facebook* and *Twitter* already provide citizens with a new form of public sphere and alternative source of news and information.

#### *The Zhanaozen case study*

The research draws data from blogging sites and printed media that reported on the worst civic conflict in the post-soviet history of Kazakhstan. In December of 2011, during the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence, oil workers clashed with the state police. These oil workers were on strike since May of 2011 following disputes over pay and working conditions. Authorities claimed that 16 people were killed and 100 were injured during the December uprising. YouTube videos demonstrated that the police fired directly into the large crowd. As a result, the Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, imposed a state of emergency in Zhanaozen, and all forms of communication with the rest of the country were cut off, including mobile and internet services (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The government expected that by cutting Zhanaozen from the outside world it would restore peace in the region, however, the lack of information only destabilised the situation.

After one of the first videos was released on YouTube showing police marching towards a group of unarmed protestors and then opening fire, the Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal investigation into the security forces' actions (Lillis, 2011). In the weeks following the clashes in Zhanaozen, the office of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan at the time, Karim Massimov, invited the country's most active and popular bloggers to visit Zhanaozen; indicating a change of

attitude towards new media by the authorities. They appeared willing to address the issues and concerns circulating on the internet about the situation in Zhanaozen by using sources perceived as more credible than the pro-governmental outlets. The trip was dubbed '*Zhanaozen, the witnesses' perspective*' by the Prime Minister's office. The accredited bloggers and journalists<sup>1</sup>, all ethnic Kazakhs, visited the city, tweeted, took pictures and wrote about the incident. As the group mainly reinforced the official position, they were immediately nicknamed the 'bloody bloggers' by the rest of the Kazakh blogosphere (Cyberautika.com, 2011).

One bloggers (Dmitry Shyolokov) who was not part of the Prime Minister's group stated "The Kazakh people never had a chance to doubt the fact that the state media is only capable of lying (Shyolokov, 2012). Hence, the visit of bloggers to Zhanaozen was taken as a way to cover up the events in Zhanaozen online too". Such views triggered an opposition group of bloggers to form their own team to visit the town. They called their trip '*Bloggers from Zhanaozen: Different Perspective*'.

The Zhanaozen events thus provide an excellent case study for the role online social media can play in the political processes of the post-socialist authoritarian Kazakhstan.

## **Online media and authoritarian states**

Digital media are increasingly used for civic activism (Calingaert, 2010). The Internet is becoming an increasingly important tool for human rights activists to mobilise and advocate for political and socio-economic reforms. It usually provides greater space for free expression than traditional media and in restricted media environments bloggers are often at the forefront of efforts to push the bounds of free expression. It has also become a central medium through which ordinary citizens can express themselves as well as share their ideas. Netizens are at the epicentre of political changes all over the world trying to both resist and to challenge authoritarian states (Reporters Without Borders 2011 report).

Foreseeing the power of the new information and communication technologies, many authoritarian states have come up with both direct and indirect ways to control, filter and manipulate the Internet (Freedom House, 2011). As Calingaert states, internet censorship and surveillance are used by the authoritarian regimes to silence their domestic critics and also to prevent the emergence of political alternative. Online surveillance gives authoritarian governments an opportunity to oversee personal communications as well as to track what citizens read (ibid).

However, it is important to note that the Internet is the least censored medium due to its distributed network. Hence, 'politically sensitive' content which criticises governments is prone to spread online faster than in traditional media (Mou et al, 2011). During times of crisis, communities receive their information through the Internet as well as through interpersonal communication channels, as recent event in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union republics have demonstrated. The Internet, consequently, has become a potential avenue for dissent (ibid).

Deibert and Rohozinski divide the techniques used by governments for Internet censorship and control into three 'generations'. The first generation of techniques focuses on 'Chinese-style'

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<sup>1</sup>Journalists of the [www.tengrinews.kz](http://www.tengrinews.kz) and [www.bnews.kz](http://www.bnews.kz) Renat Tashkinbayev and Anar Bazmuhametova were also invited.

Internet filtering and Internet-café surveillance. ‘Second generation’ techniques include the construction of legal environments legitimising information control, authorities’ informal request to companies for removal of information, technical shutdowns of websites, and computer-network attacks. ‘Third-generation’ techniques include warrantless surveillance, the creation of ‘national cyber-zones’, state-sponsored information campaigns, and direct physical action to silence individuals or groups (MacKinnon, 2011). Deibert and Rohozinski point out that a number of governments, particularly in Russia and in several former Soviet republics, have by-passed the first-generation controls almost completely and instead are concentrating their energies on second- and third-generation controls, most of which are more subtle, more difficult to delete and more compatible with democratic and pseudo democratic institutions (MacKinnon, 2011).

When an authoritarian regime embraces and adjusts to the inevitable changes brought by digital communication, the result is what MacKinnon calls ‘networked authoritarianism.’ In the networked authoritarian state, the single ruling party remains in control while a wide range of conversations about the country’s problems nonetheless occurs on websites and social-networking services. The government follows this online chatter, and sometimes people are able to use the Internet to call attention to social problems or injustices and even manage to have an impact on government policies. In the networked authoritarian state, there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. Those whom the rulers see as threats are jailed; truly competitive, free, and fair elections are not held; and the courts and the legal system are tools of the ruling party (MacKinnon, 2011).

## **Media, Internet and Censorship in Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan declared its independence from the Soviet Union on the 16th of December of 1991, and it was the last USSR republic to do so. Its former Soviet leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, became Kazakhstan’s first President, a position he still retains today. Despite the high hopes for the emergence of democracy in Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (A Sobering Reality, 2012), Kazakhstan is still viewed today as an authoritarian state (see Economist’s Democracy Index, 2012) where the President plays the role of “the highest state office, responsible for naming the government and all other republic’s officials” (Kekic, 2007). The President’s influence extends to media too as his family controls the majority of newspapers and television stations, including the state television company – Khabar (Cummings, 2005).

At a glance, Kazakhstan appears to have a strong media industry, including over 2,500 regularly published newspapers and magazines. Private mass-media make up nearly 80 per cent of all the existing mass media. There are also 238 representatives of online media, as well as 100 television and radio stations (eGov, 2012). However, in spite of a large volume of periodical publications and other forms of media, Kazakhstan ranks only 182nd out of 196 countries, and 26th out of the 29 former Soviet republics, for press freedom (Freedom House, 2013). Freedom House also indicated that the authorities have narrowed the space for independent voices even further in 2012 by banning around 40 opposition media outlets, one of which was the main national opposition news organisation, and stepping up violence and legal prosecution of the remaining independent and critical journalists (RWB, 2013). World Press Freedom Index 2013 (RWB, 2013) suggested that President Nazarbayev’s government ‘moved closer to the ultra-authoritarian model of its neighbours in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.’ Such statistics clearly indicate the existence of tight control over the media by the Kazakh government, and a strong system of censorship that also spills over onto the Internet.

Initially, Kazakhstan's government considered the internet as a new source for strengthening its economic position in Central Asia by becoming the region's information-technology hub. According to the World Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Index 2012, Kazakhstan is the top-ranked country of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in terms of information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital uptake. The government has made the development of digital information technologies a national priority resulting in attempts to liberalise the communication sector and promote internet usage (Nichol, 2012).

However, the government has realised the democratising power of the Internet and tried to control access to it (Freedom House, 2011). Kazakhstan's general prosecutor has publicly spoken out in favour of increased control of social networks, calling it 'the evil' (A Sobering Reality, 2012). In 2009, a new bill was passed equating Internet resources with other media, allowing the government to interfere in the content of domestic and international online resources available in Kazakhstan. Since 2011, access to 160 websites has been blocked limited because they allegedly spread 'extremist' propaganda. LiveJournal was one of them (Reutskiy, 2012). As the events were unfolding in Zhanaozen, the authorities blocked the access to Twitter temporarily. The online video portal [www.stan.kz](http://www.stan.kz) which was covering events in Zhanaozen was sued by the authorities for health and safety reasons. Another news website, [www.guljan.org](http://www.guljan.org), was subjected to cyber-attacks in 2011, and one of its reporters was convicted of criminal charges before the website was eventually blocked (A Sobering Reality, 2012).

Despite government censorship, internet usage in Kazakhstan has grown dramatically over the last ten years – from 0.7 per cent penetration rate in 2000 to 28 per cent (or 4.3 million people) by the end of 2010 (Freedom House, 2011). There are more than seven thousand registered websites in Kazakhstan. Kazakhtelecom is the largest telecom company holding a 73 per cent share of the market for internet and data communications and offers broadband internet access in all major cities and regions (Kazakhtelecom Annual report, 2011). State-run Internet Service Provider (ISP) – Kazakhtelecom, dominates the internet and mobile market and routinely blocks sites which publish 'sensitive' information, including [www.respublika-kaz.info](http://www.respublika-kaz.info) and [www.k-plus.tv.net](http://www.k-plus.tv.net). Both of these websites are sponsored by the political opposition in exile. To further its control the government established new regulations which stipulate all top-level .kz domain owners must route their traffic through servers which are physically located in Kazakhstan.

The 2008 blocking of LiveJournal, at the time the most popular blogging platform in Kazakhstan, generated significant changes to the country's blogosphere. Before it was blocked, LiveJournal hosted 32 per cent of all active Russian-language blogs in Kazakhstan, or nearly 230,000 users. Some bloggers migrated to other international platforms like blogger.com or LiveInternet.ru, while others retained their blogs on LiveJournal but used a proxy server to access it. One of the local blogging sites, Yvision.kz, has emerged as the most popular Kazakhstan-based blog-hosting platform, with over 14,000 users blogging mostly in Russian (Emrich & Plakhina, 2013).

In an effort to counter criticism of the blocking of LiveJournal and demonstrate a willingness to engage with citizens online, government officials started to keep their own blogs in recent years. The initiative appears to have attracted little attention and has had a limited impact on public opinion as the blogs generally resemble other government press portals in style and content (Freedom House, 2011).

In addition, Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbours have focused their attention on online security threats. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) which includes Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, is now looking at mechanisms to control social networking sites in order to prevent 'extremist' actions – like those seen in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011.

The horizontal nature of the internet empowers citizens to generate and disseminate content. Although the web makes the flow of information more difficult to control, as the Zhanaozen case demonstrates, there are still several ways for the authorities to manipulate online content.. This censorship of digital media is also more intrusive and affects a larger number of people than restrictions on more traditional channels (Calingaert, 2010).

## **Methodology**

This research seeks to identify how social media is used in Kazakhstan using the Zanhaozen events as a case study. It attempts to identify how the Kazakh government handles control of the internet and engages with online audiences, while also trying to identify the impact the events have had on online political activism in the country as well.

The research is exploratory in nature as little or no data has been available and initial investigations were required to determine the boundaries of more extensive work to follow (Given, 2008). In line with most exploratory studies which tend to be qualitative-data dominated (ibid), this research takes a predominantly qualitative oriented **content analysis** approach in order to map the blogging activities, and with elements of **discourse analysis** at a later stage. Qualitative content analysis examines significant aspects of texts that are not amenable to quantitative methods. It can also reveal evidence and patterns that are difficult to notice through casual observations (Baumeister & Vohs, 2012). By **mapping** and analysing the blogging sites content and participation, the researchers hope to identify netizens' activities in Kazakhstan's blogosphere.

**Framing theory** was employed as an analytical tool. Framing theory, a relatively new communication theory, looks at how certain information is used to influence people's knowledge and understanding (Tiung & Hasim, 2009). The information about a particular issue or topic is often selected and carefully spread, which causes the interpretation of events to be based on an individual's knowledge, interests and needs. In other words, framing is important as it has an influence on how people see and interpret a particular issue (ibid). Framing is useful when it comes to understanding the media's role in political life. Within this study, framing theory provides an understanding of the role of social media on political processes in Kazakhstan by analysing information posted online as well as of that published in Kazakhstan's press.

A key framing concept employed here is the 'law and (dis)order', used in the analysis of media representations of protests and demonstrations. Protests tend to be labelled as deviant and by emphasizing drama, spectacle and violence, media de-legitimise their aims and politics (Cottle & Lester, 2011, p. 62).

## *Data collection*

Data was collected over a period of three months, from 16 December 2011 (when the events started) to 27 March 2012 (when the trials of the 37 oil workers began). The blogging websites

*YVision* and *Livejournal* were the primary focus of analysis. These sites were chosen because of their popularity in the Kazakhstan's blogosphere. In addition, two Kazakhstan national newspapers (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Respublika*), including the online version of the *Respublika*, were included as they both represented the mainstream traditional media. These newspapers provide a comparative context against which the blogging sites are positioned in terms of content.

- [www.yvision.kz](http://www.yvision.kz) – Kazakhstan's main blogging platform. The website includes the blogging platform itself, online-TV and special projects both in Russian and Kazakh.
- [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com) – Russian social networking website. Users can either keep a blog, a journal, or a diary. The service is also used for political commentary, in Russia in particular. This website was initially selected due to the fact some members of the opposition in exile used this particular website for communication with Kazakhstan's blogosphere.
- *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* is the Kazakhstan's national newspaper and the main official and business information source in the country. Legislative documents come into effect once they are published in the newspaper.
- *Respublika* is the opposition private newspaper known for its critical articles about the government and corruption. It was forced to cease printing in 2012 as a result of a government-initiated lawsuit and is now only available online (Emrich & Plakhina, 2013).
- *Respublika portal* – [www.respublika-kz.info](http://www.respublika-kz.info) – online space for expert discussion on political processes and issues in both Central Asia and Russia.

In order to retrieve the whole list of blogs created on both LiveJournal and YVision (available during the data collection time), a search engine was used on both of the websites and also through the links which were available on them using the following key words: Zhanaozen, Zhanaozen uprising 2011, Zhanaozen protests, the oil workers of Zhanaozen, the mass killings of the oil workers in Zhanaozen.

In the process of identifying the blogging sites and creating content categories, it was soon realised that the LiveJournal platform was not used as much as expected by the Kazakh since it was blocked in the country, and not many Kazakhs knew how to circumvent the restrictions by employing proxy services. Instead the main blogging platform turned out to be the [www.yvision.kz](http://www.yvision.kz) website. The so-called 'bloody bloggers' mainly used it to write about their trip to Zhanaozen. Those who went on a separate, independent trip to the town were posting their blogs and comments here as well.

PDF versions of the two newspapers were used. *Respublika's* website was included as it provides quick news updates which were useful in documenting how the events in Zanhaozen unfolded. It is also often used like a blogging platform where people can also comment on the site's articles; which added another dimension to the study.

### *Identifying data categories*

A **two stage content analysis** was conducted. The **first stage** was seen as the general **mapping** of the content and participants. The following five questions, informed by literature were developed for the initial content analysis stage which generated separate **themes** with **sub-themes** used in the subsequent qualitative content analysis:

- How was the conflict in Zhanaozen **framed**?  
The preliminary research identified the main sub-themes: *socio-economic issues; law and (dis)order; political instability caused by the opposition in exile; political instability caused by the internal force; conspiracy; and other.*
- Who was the **voice** of the events?  
The following were identified: *national government; army; police; protesters; Kazakhstan Prosecutor General's office; the oil company – KazMunaiGaz; and political opposition both inside and outside of Kazakhstan.*
- What is the story **subject** of the news reports/ blogs?  
The three main subjects included: *discussions about social networking websites; socio-economic issues; and the role of printed media and TV in covering the events of Zhanaozen.*
- What story **sources** are used?
- What is the main **language** of blogging? (Russian, Kazakh or English)

The early mapping of content and participants also identified the following three main groups of bloggers: those selected by the government to visit the city also known as the 'bloody bloggers;' those who went on a trip to Zhanaozen independently, called by others the 'free bloggers;' and the remaining bloggers who either supported the first or the second group or remained neutral.

## Findings

There was a clear distinction between those bloggers, all ethnic Kazakhs, who went on the organised trip to Zhanaozen and appeared supportive of the current political regime in Kazakhstan and those who acted independently and formed an 'opposition' group, including a few ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. The remaining bloggers engaged in posting on this event either took sides with one of these groups or followed discussions from a neutral position. Interestingly, this third group was the most vocal and posted a number of messages regarding the events in Zhanaozen, as well as actively commenting on the blogs posted by others.

## Framing

The following sub-themes emerged from the findings: *socio-economic issues; law and (dis)order; political instability caused by the opposition in exile; political instability caused by the internal force; conspiracy; and other.* Political instability and law and disorder were two of the key emerging framing perspectives. New Kazakhs or Oralmans (ethnic Kazakhs) seem to become a scapegoat, accused by some to be the cause of the instability.

*The Respublika* newspaper and the bloggers who either did not go to Zhanaozen on an organised trip or went there by themselves – the 'free' bloggers, believe the source of the problem is the current socio-economic conditions both in the region and in the country which have led to the uprising in Zhanaozen. These problems were identified as social injustice, the inability of the local and state authorities to intervene and solve the emerging issues, class struggle of particular members of the society, ethnic tensions among Kazakhs and newly migrated Oralmans, lack of job opportunities, poverty, control of all natural resources by a group which is close to President Nazarbayev, and the working conditions of the protesting oil workers.

The 'law and disorder' aspect seemed to be another emerging theme. Some bloggers, mainly those who went on the trip organised by the government authorities, pointed at the recent immigration of

the Oralmans into the region from other countries e.g., China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. According to some of them, the Oralmans might be responsible for the Zhanaozen uprising. Blogger *Zhomart* states that the police forces were not firing indiscriminately, but only at the extremists who were attacking the constitutional order of the country. The protestors were terrorists, he concludes (Toregozhina, 2011).

*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda (KazPravda)* looked at events from a 'law and disorder' perspective and suggested the protests were started by hooligans. The 'bloody bloggers' agree with this interpretation adding that some 'forces' have used the oil workers to cause havoc in the region. It suggested they are trying to destabilise Kazakhstan by breaking up society into small groups which question the nation's integrity, unity and stability. The fact that Kazakhstan is integrating economically with both Russia and Belarus might have upset some states – was also named as one of the possibilities by *KazPravda*.

In the *Respublika* newspaper, the events in Zhanaozen were linked to 'socio-economic issues' which the government was trying to suppress so that they would not lead to political instability. Hence, the army's involvement in the conflict gets justified. As quoted by *Respublika's* portal, Kozlov, one of the opposition leaders currently imprisoned, believes the government will be using this uprising as an excuse to implement some radical political measures. The portal also suggests that 'law and disorder' can be one of the possible frames for describing the events in Zhanaozen in 2011.

Other bloggers believe that the events in Zhanaozen in 2011 demonstrate the 'instability within the country.' They suggest it all could have been provoked by particular political groups within Kazakhstan in order to gain power after Nazarbayev leaves his posts. Hence, the political elites are trying to destabilise the situation so they can begin discussions with President Nazarbayev about his succession plans. 'Political instability' caused by the opposition in exile was another prominent topic. One of the 'bloody bloggers' suggests that the events in Zhanaozen had nothing to do with the oil workers; instead, someone took advantage of them and the situation.

The conspiracy theories have been quite prominent. Bloggers suggest that the U.S. State Department could have been involved, as well as other western countries, to get access to the Caspian Sea and its oil reserves (Saibitov, 2012, Er Kulov, 2011). Others<sup>2</sup> have suggested there are a number of strategic reasons why international political actors would wish to destabilise Kazakhstan. One is to cut China off from Kazakh energy resources; another is to compare the situation to NATO's justifications for intervening in Libya. Another goal is to weaken the southern borders of Russia and to create geopolitical chaos alongside the world's longest border. The possible disintegration of the Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus and preventing the creation of the Eurasian Union were also suggested by these bloggers as motives for fomenting the unrest. At the same time other bloggers implied it was unwise to blame the U.S. as it was more likely that former Kazakhstan citizens were involved (Bahtigareev, 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> Er Kulov, 2011, Pravdorub, 2011, Abdenova, 2011, Kudrenko, 2011 and Bahtigareev, 2012



## *Voice*

The following groups were identified as the main quoted voices in the reported news items and blogging sites: *government, army, police, Kazakhstan's Prosecutor General, the KazMunaiGaz oil company, political opposition and protesters*. In the course of the data mining processes, it became evident that the government, the army, the police and the prosecutor general represent the same voice – the official voice of the Kazakh authorities, centred around President Nazarbayev. The state-run media mainly used the voices of governmental officials. .

The primary voices in the articles published in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* were the local authorities, the Prosecutor General, the academics who supported the government's assertions, the WWII veterans and the bloggers who went on a trip to Zhanaozen which was organised by Prime Minister Karim Massimov.

The voices of the *Respublika* newspaper were the oil workers, their relatives, the local governmental representatives, as well as one member of the European Parliament – Paul Murphy. The newspaper also voiced the information provided by what they called the inside sources, members of opposition parties as well as of bloggers. The *Respublika portal* voiced the interests of the local citizens of Zhanaozen, as well as of representatives of the UN, OSCE and the U.S. State Department. Kazakhstan's political opposition in exile and its prominent representative Mukhtar Ablyazov were also voiced.

The 'bloody bloggers' mainly referred to official sources, such as the akimat (mayor's office), the police and the Prosecutor General's office. During their visit to Zhanaozen, they have also interviewed the new representative of the KazMunaiGaz oil company. Some locals were interviewed by the 'bloody bloggers.' However, as blogger *Sadenova* noted, people on the streets of Zhanaozen were very quiet about the events; hence the bloggers were only able to get a couple of comments. Most of the time, people said they did not hear or see anything. The group had also interviewed some people at the Zhanaozen hospital. As *Sadenova* described it, the bloggers shut the doors and started talking to the patients. Some said that they have heard of people missing and being held by the police. When one of the 'bloody bloggers' asked whether they could name any, or if they knew anyone personally, the patient said "no.". However, one wonders how open they could have been when the interviews were all being recorded on video.

The oil workers, their families and the locals of Zhanaozen were the voice of the 'free bloggers.' Many interviews were recorded and uploaded to YouTube, hence the blogging turned into vlogging. By sharing the video interviews with the rest of the world, they were hoping for wider coverage as well as the involvement of the international community.

One of the first who visited Zhanaozen was the Russian journalist Elena Kostyuchenko. She covered the case of an individual not connected with the oil workers, or the protesting movement for that matter, but who still got held by the police, beaten, and subsequently died. This story was widely commented on and discussed in Kazakhstan's blogosphere, – especially by the 'free bloggers.'

Those who did not go to Zhanaozen referred to both – the officials and the oil workers. Some were referring to either one of the group of bloggers who went to Zhanaozen. Also, the voices of some of the political scientists were mentioned as well.

## ***Story subjects***

The findings have identified three main story subjects, *discussions about social networking websites; socio-economic issues; and the role of printed media and TV* in the events of Zhanaozen.

### *Discussions about social networking websites*

How information was disseminated through social networking websites was covered by blogs as well as stories the main stream official media. The *Republika* portal dedicated a few stories to its own blocking as well as to the restriction imposed on Twitter. *Republika's* website also provided detailed information on how to avoid blocking by using proxy services. Some of the stories it posted had rather controversial content which frequently contradicted the authorities' positions. They reported on the gas used against protesters; suggestions that war had already started in the region; or how the opposition leaders were prevented from boarding the plane to Zhanaozen; and that the 'bloody bloggers were taken to the town like VIPs – their integrity. *Respublika* even questioned the 'propaganda' skills of the government by asking why it revealed that selected bloggers were taken to Zhanaozen, as not making this public would have made their stories more credible to the Kazakhstani public. They also questioned why independent bloggers were not allowed into the area.

The role of the media, both mainstream and online, in covering the protests was also discussed by the free bloggers. Sadenova (2011) comments on the role of the *Respublika* newspaper and the messages it put online urging people to join protestors on the main street. She suggests that if one is referring to provocations, not only should the actions of those young 'hooligans' who were reported to be wearing black clothing on the day be evaluated, but also the messages put out by the pro-government media too. The 'bloody bloggers' also commented on the role of television as some videos released by K+ resulted in arrests of a few protestors. These videos assisted police with identifying them. The 'bloody bloggers' discussed 'that' (as it was referred to) particular video posted on YouTube right after the events. In regards to Twitter, some 'bloody bloggers' supported its blocking (Elikbayev, 2011). It seems they were also aware they were called the 'bloody bloggers,' as some revelled in announcing their 'bloody [online] following.' In addition, the events in Zhanaozen were also covered by another 'bloody blogger' who posted a photo-story of Zhanaozen to the photo-blogging platform [www.voxpopuli.kz](http://www.voxpopuli.kz)

One of the main discussions taking place amongst those bloggers who did not go on the organised trip to Zhanaozen was the 'Twitter counter-revolution' organised by Nazarbayev. A blogger named Kromanionez (Toregozhina, 2011) comments that the former prime minister's bloggers worked very systematically and professionally – the links to their 'blog-tour' were on the Russian news sources, such as RBK, Rosbalt and 'Echo Moskvi' – the latter even wrote an article called *'Battle online: Bloggers against the 'Soldiers of Khalifat.'* The same commentator claims the prime minister gathered 'popular' yet 'loyal' bloggers and organising the so-called 'blog-tour' to cover up the execution of its citizens in Zhanaozen. He also used his official website (<http://pm.kz/zhanaozen/ru>) as a platform for live Twitter conversations. The same blogger commented that the 'bloody bloggers' had dropped any pretence of impartiality by posting interviews with the authorities while ignoring those they saw injured at the hospital.

Bakhytzhani2010 (Toregozhina, 2011) posted information about the bloggers who went to Zhanaozen independently and who were denied official media accreditation. The video covering the

conversation of these bloggers with the authorities about their inability to go to Zhanaozen was posted on YouTube and re-posted by Bakhytzhan2010 into her blog. Additional videos included interviews with locals who suggested the police should take the responsibility for what happened in Zhanaozen.

Dmitry Shyolokov, one of the free bloggers who visited Zhanaozen, posted a message stating that for the very first time in the history of Kazakhstan, the bloggers became the source of information not published previously by official media. When talking to the people of Zhanaozen, he did not feel like he was a blogger, nor a journalist, but rather a member of the committee investigating the events of Zhanaozen 2011. Possibly, he suggests, this might have been the turning point in the history of the Kazakhstan's blogging (Shoylov, 2012). Shyolokov's observations tell us about the emergence of a new public sphere created by social media.

Online tactics to divert public opinion were also discussed by the independent bloggers. Kromanionez (2011) for instance noted that the 'bloody bloggers' were re-tweeting the article written by Elena Kostyuchenko where she expressed support for lesbians as a way of discrediting trying to discredit her and redirecting public attention away her post about the victims of police torture. Traditional Kazakh society does not tolerate homosexuality and connecting a journalist or a blogger with the gay or lesbian communities would discredit them in the eyes of many Kazakhs.

A blogger, Murat, not directly involved in the events of Zhanaozen, confirmed that he was asked by the oil workers to delete them from the newsfeed list on Twitter which they had signed up to. The oil workers were afraid law enforcement agencies were checking up on everyone using Twitter and Facebook in Zhanaozen. Murat acknowledged that the investigators were looking for people who taught the protesting oil workers how to use social networking websites and realised that he was also under surveillance (Atambayev, 2012). In 2011, Murat was training the activists of Zhanaozen on how to use the latest communications technology. Moreover, after he trained the members of the Alga party – whose leader is now imprisoned – how to make videos and upload them to YouTube, the KNB accused him of trying to organise a Kazakhstani Arab Spring. It is clear the authorities understand very well the dangers that new media pose to their version of social and political stability.

The blocking of Twitter also was discussed by the independent bloggers. The blogger *likelike\_you* (2011) reported that two days after Twitter was blocked, a message appeared suggesting the owners of the website had problems. The blogger believes the Kazakh authorities were panicking as they could not predict the effect mass Twitter usage was having on society.

The events in Zhanaozen allowed some bloggers to have a general debate about the role of the internet and television in the 'war to win over the society's consciousness.' Blogger *subject* (2011) suggests that the Internet allows the formation of an alternative perspective to the one shown on TV by the authorities. The blogger believes that in the future, the role of new media will only increase if the authorities do not change their information policies. Another tendency, the blogger argues, is the disappointment in the traditional media in general. The internet allows people to find those who think alike, and the Kazakhs are learning to use these options fast.

According to Andrea Schmitz (2012), the events in Zhanaozen are symptoms of an emerging crisis. In accordance with the so called 'social contract' initiated by Nazarbayev, everyone is granted the right to pursue financial profits in exchange for giving up their political freedom. Recently,

however, the terms and conditions of this 'contract' were reconsidered as the protesting oil workers had access to neither financial profit nor political freedom. The blogger speculates that this 'social contract' may not work in the future (Toregozhina, 2011).

A number of bloggers suggested that an information war against Kazakhstan was taking place (MontKristov, 2011, Buharbayev, 2011). According to these bloggers, there was nothing to prove the deaths of 'hundreds of people' as well as the 'bloody shootings of the civilians.' 'That' particular video, according to one of the bloggers, became the best propaganda tool. Some bloggers urged all citizens of Kazakhstan to contact KNB or the police if they notice someone who may be trying to organise a provocation (Kreich, 2011). Some bloggers quoted a Chinese politician who believed that the events in Zhanaozen were organised from abroad, and China was prepared to offer its help to prevent the same from happening in future (Kudrenko, 2011).

Although the 'free bloggers' criticised the 'bloody bloggers,' their own credibility was also questioned by some. One blogger posted a note written by the taxi driver who took the 'free' bloggers to another city. The videos uploaded by the 'free bloggers' to YouTube were called fake by this blogger (p\_chernov, 2012).

The idea behind the trip of the 'bloody bloggers' to Zhanaozen, according to Sadenova (2011), was to dispel the rumours that started to circulate in Kazakhstan. Hence, most of the posts were dedicated to explaining what did and did not take place on the 16th of December, and how the information was misused by the political opposition.

Those who did not go to Zhanaozen, or went on a trip on their own, mainly focused on the issues of the oil workers, the tortures which were taking place in Zhanaozen, as well as how the event was portrayed in some of the Russian media. However, the 'bloody bloggers' were backing up the government's assertions which stated that the events in Zhanaozen were not as dramatic as presented by the opposition, whereas the rest focused on what was taking place in Zhanaozen on a day-to-day basis.

Bribery was mentioned by one blogger who claimed to be offered \$200 by one of the Bnews journalists to write positive news about the upcoming parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan. He declined the offer, but uploaded a print screen of the conversation on the internet (Iconoclast, 2012). It is interesting to note, that journalists from the very same newspaper went to Zhanaozen with the bloody bloggers to write about the uprising.

All this clearly indicate that the debate about different forms reporting on Zhanaozen and also the different groups of reporters were taking place in parallel with the reporting itself.

### *The role of printed media and TV*

The president of the K+ TV company became part of the story s in the article published by *Respublika*. Here he argues that if only the events in Zhanaozen in the summer of 2011 were covered by the state media, people would know what was happening and would have probably figured out how to deal with the emerging socio-economic issues. According to K+TV, President Nazarbayev is disappointed that the information about Zhanaozen is leaking out of the country to Russia, hence, had asked Medvedev, then the President of the Russian Federation, to block the K+

TV station on the territory of the Russian Federation. The journalists of the same TV station addressed Nazarbayev to help to stop the surveillance which was implemented towards them.

One blogger suggested that the opposition mass media, such as K+ and *Respublika* were only making matters worse in Zhanaozen. The blogger believed that the state should have its own journalists on state TV and in newspapers who would cover the events impartially. This, the blogger concluded, could only help the protesters to trust the authorities (Buharbayev, 2011). Adam Keshner (2011), one of the most active bloggers in the Kazakh blogosphere, touched on the issue of media's responsibility arguing that journalists sometimes can also be manipulated by media agencies as well as by the authorities. The blogger argued that there is no independent media in Kazakhstan, making a distinction between state news and 'difference news.' According to Adam Keshner (2011), nobody criticises the state media not because everyone is happy with it, but because no one expects much from it. However, the public expects a lot from K+ as it is portrayed as independent. He expressed his dissatisfaction with how the K+TV channel mixed together the oil workers and those who provoked the uprising. It is obvious, he argued, that the state should admit that the force used was unlawful, and the police should face the consequences (Nurmakov, 2011).

The story subjects of both newspapers, *Respublika* and *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, were very different. The information presented in the *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* newspaper was descriptive and very detailed in explaining what the officials did to resolve the Zhanaozen situation. On the other hand, the *Respublika* newspaper discussed the struggles the opposition TV station K+ had to undergo to cover Zhanaozen's uprising, as well as the struggles of the political opposition in order to deliver the report before the members of the EU Parliament. When the same story subject was covered by both, their approaches were markedly different. *KazPravda* described the organised trip by the 'bloody bloggers' as a way to publicise that life is normalising in Zhanaozen. On the other hand, the journalists of the *Respublika* portal considered this trip to be bad PR for the regime as the 'bloody bloggers' were discredited by the majority of other bloggers.

The way traditional outlets took limited notice of the blogging activity and reported on it and the blogger's coverage of events, indicate some kind of impact by the blogosphere on mainstream media.

### *Socio-economic issues*

*Respublika* discusses the fact that the leaders of the opposition were not allowed to go to the funerals of those who died on the 16th of December in Zhanaozen. Those protesters, who survived the day, were being tortured by the police and asked to name organisers in return for freedom.

The role of the EU in the events of Zhanaozen had also been discussed. *Respublika* (2012) reported that Ketebaev unsuccessfully visited Brussels aiming to explain the events in Zhanaozen to the members of the EU Parliament. However, the Head of the Central Asian Commission refused to allow him to do a presentation. *Respublika* (2012) also reported on the Committee for National Security (KNB) efforts to link the riots in Zhanaozen and the activity of some oil workers on Twitter.

Articles in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2012) were mainly dedicated to the actions taken by the hooligans in order to destabilise the situation in Kazakhstan. The newspaper also published some propaganda-like articles by academics in support of the actions taken by the police. A number of

articles described Nazarbayev's visit to Zhanaozen when he blamed the hooligans who took advantage of the social tensions and the labour dispute between the oil workers and the oil company.<sup>3</sup>

Bloggers speculated on who was behind the events in Zhanaozen. They questioned noticeable coordination between those who started the unrest with the actions of the police. The witnesses according to the *turan\_tiger* (2011) blogger suggest that the police provoked the oil workers.

The view of Zhanaozen-2011 being organised from within by the political elite was also present amongst the group of those bloggers who did not go to Zhanaozen (galym\_m7, 2011). One of the bloggers (ivan\_pravdorub, 2011) analysed the posts by Bakhytzhan2010. This blogger, who also supports the group of free bloggers, referred to the article written by Elena Kostyuchenko and the report written by Human Rights Watch. The blogger suggested that if the police wanted to torture people, they would have found some other way of doing so without their injuries being displayed so openly. Another blogger (MontKristov, 2012) dedicated the whole post to Bakhytzhan2010, who, as he stated, was known as 'a professional provocateur, instigator and the distributor of rumours, speculation and false information.' Hence, the blogger urges the officials to pay attention to her actions and held her accountable for them.

The traditional state-run mass media as well as the 'bloody bloggers' used the government as the primary source of information. Whereas *Respublika* newspaper and its online portal and the rest of the bloggers referred mainly to the information provided by the opposition parties, such as Alga, those who were involved in the events of Zhanaozen-2011 directly, other bloggers and some mainstream Russian mass media.

### *Language use*

According to the census taken in 2009, only two-thirds of Kazakhstan's 16,878 million inhabitants have a decent command of Kazakh, which is the state language. Kazakhs comprise about 62 per cent of the population. Russians form the biggest minority group and the Russian language is a lingua franca officially alongside Kazakh in state bodies. The knowledge of Russian in Kazakhstan is widespread, with 94 per cent understanding it orally and 85 per cent able to read and write it (Lillis, 2010, Emrich & Plakhina, 2013).

During the Soviet era, the Russian language came to dominate politics, business, education, and media. The current situation reflects that legacy. Although the proportion of the ethnic Kazakh population is steadily growing, many people still prefer using Russian in everyday life and for news consumption. According to the constitution, Kazakh is the official state language while Russian is an official language of "inter-ethnic communication," and along with Kazakh is an official language of use in state institutions and local self-government bodies (OSF, 2013).

Given this, it was expected the state-run media, newspapers supported by the political opposition as well as most bloggers would use Russian. Not only would this allow the majority of Kazakhstan's population to understand the information, it would also give an opportunity to those who are outside of Kazakhstan to be informed about the event.

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<sup>3</sup> (AkOrda, 2011).

It is interesting to note however, that all 'bloody bloggers' were ethnic Kazakhs, while the 'free bloggers' were a mixed group including ethnic Russians. This ethnic representation was not visible language wise and it is more noticeable with the 'bloody bloggers' whose ethnicity seems to be a selection criterion but which does not manifest itself in the language chosen.

Some of the relatives of the oil workers interviewed by the 'free' bloggers could only speak Kazakh, however, that was translated by the interviewers into Russian. In one instance, a 'bloody blogger' asked a colleague and another blogger to translate her post into English.

## **Conclusions**

Analysis of online social media and activism during the social unrest in Zhanaozen made it apparent that the old authoritarian method dealing with social and political uprisings by simply cutting the place off from the outside world will not work any longer in Kazakhstan. Political activists mobilised online social media to inform the nation and the world about the uprising and the role of the government authorities in the repressions and punishment that followed. However, the research also demonstrates that the Kazakh government mobilised to find effective ways to control online social media. The invitation of the group who were quickly labelled the 'bloody bloggers', to visit Zhanaozen and to report on the uprising echoes the old model that existed in the former USSR; when 'accredited journalists' were 'employed' by the state to transmit the official messages and state ideology.

The attempts by the Kazakh government to control the situation resulted in the separation of the bloggers into a few distinctive groups according to their allegiance to the authorities. The bloggers who support the regime or 'bloody bloggers,' the free bloggers who were not invited by the authorities to visit Zhanaozen and went there by their own, and the third group of 'other' bloggers who do not belong to the first two groups and which made online reporting even more complex.

The power of online activism in Kazakhstan is evident from the government attempts to manipulate at least some bloggers to make them report the official line. Mainstream media acknowledges the existence of online media by utilising their reporting for their own publications. The next question to answer in our research is what do online social activism and the emerging public sphere tell us about the changing nature of Kazakh society?

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