



Kazakhstan Focus Group Discussions – Spring 2022

Internet Use in Kazakhstan

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Executive Summary

IRI designed and commissioned a qualitative study of internet use consisting of twelve focus group discussions in four cities of Kazakhstan: Astana, Almaty, Atyrau and Shymkent. The participants consisted of internet users who varied based on gender, age, education, capacity to use the internet and primary language (Russian or Kazakh). The primary research objectives were to understand the importance and utility of the internet for people of Kazakhstan and the role of the internet in local media consumption. Additional research objectives were to investigate citizens' preferred internet content and language of content, as well as the impact of internet shutdowns on Kazakhstanis. Sange Research Center in Kazakhstan conducted this study. As is common with qualitative research, findings from this study are not necessarily representative of the opinions of all people in Kazakhstan. Throughout this report, the term "Kazakh" is used to refer to ethnic Kazakhs, whereas the term Kazakhstanis is used to refer to citizens of Kazakhstan, including ethnic minorities.

Finding 1 - Media Consumption and Internet Accessibility Many study participants report that they rely on the internet for content more than any other media. While many say that accessibility and quality vary across different regions, in general they are satisfied with the level of internet connection available to them. In rural areas, participants report that the internet is often slow, and the quality of cellular service depends greatly on the operator. Internet access is not considered expensive by participants. Media consumption is seen as very age-dependent: young and middle-aged people are internet users, while elderly people and children watch TV, with children watching entertainment and educational programs and older people watching TV series, talk shows, and news. Newspapers are read by the elderly and residents of rural areas, and people listen to radio while commuting. Russian-language television consumption, including news, is quite high, but in rural areas Kazakh-language content is most popular.

Finding 2 - Internet Use and Its Role According to study participants, internet use in Kazakhstan is widespread and diverse, encompassing everyday communication, news, work, exchanges of goods, shopping, entertainment, leisure, finance, government service provision, education, and personal growth. News is received mainly from local Kazakhstanis news websites and social media. Participants believe the internet in Kazakhstan is fairly accessible, especially in urban areas. Participants spend most of their time online on social media. In addition to the personal benefits of internet use, Kazakhstanis have a positive assessment of the internet in general, referring to the economic, time-saving, and environmental benefits of internet use.

Finding 3 - Content Sources and Trust in Information Trust in information and understanding of content sources is often correlated with the age and experience of internet users. For basic internet users who participated in the study, especially older people, the question of who is producing the content is difficult to understand. Some participants report that they do not think about it. More advanced users stated that they verify information using different sources, cross-checking it against other sources to form an opinion. Local news and information on social media are seen as highly contradictory. According to participants, official state-produced information about Kazakhstan is often presented from a positive perspective, and information is presented more critically when it comes from independent sources. Focus groups revealed that people were more likely to trust official sources and local news, but that this confidence was shattered by the January 2022 events¹. Information on the internet is seen as more credible when it comes from the direct participants in the January events, especially if it is supported by video. Advanced users rely more on independent media outlets.

Finding 4 - Language of Content Many Kazakhstanis consume internet content in both Russian and Kazakh. Although there is informative material on current events, literature, and history in Kazakh, participants feel there is a shortage of technical and specialized content in Kazakh. Internet communication and information consumption in Kazakh are highly dependent on the region. For example, in Atyrau and Shymkent people tend to communicate and look for information in Kazakh, whereas in Almaty and Astana most people do so in Russian. Advanced users mostly consume information in Russian and English. The quantity and quality of materials on technical, scientific, medical, legal, and popular scientific topics in Kazakh is limited. This kind of content is translated mainly from Russian and sometimes from English. Participants acknowledge an acute need for content in Kazakh, especially for educational purposes. Kazakh speakers are more satisfied with the quality of content in Kazakh than bilingual Kazakhstanis are. Participants' trust in information from the internet does not depend on the language of the content; rather it comes from the consumers' media literacy and the perceived accuracy and professionalism of the information's source(s).

Finding 5 - Internet Shutdowns: Politics or Security? Internet shutdowns associated with the January 2022 events are seen by many Kazakhstanis as depriving them of vital communication with their friends, family, and society at large; some view them as violations of their basic rights and freedoms. The shutdowns resulted in anxiety and fear. Disconnection from electronic payment systems caused difficulties. Some participants feel that internet shutdowns are to some degree an opportunity to 'detoxify' from social media, a chance to slow down, enjoy face-to-face communication, and consume print media. Internet shutdowns are also associated with stress, panic, and a sense of danger. Some participants expressed the idea that the shutdowns were necessary and justified to combat terrorism and restore order.

¹ Large-scale anti-government protests took place across Kazakhstan in January 2022. The protests began in response to rising fuel prices and took on a more anti-regime character, then spiraled into civil unrest.

Finding 6 - Digital Rights Digital rights in Kazakhstan are not always well understood. According to participants, citizens have not yet decided whether access to the internet is a right or a service. Basic internet users believe that it is a service, but more advanced users believe that it is a right that should be protected. Many technologically advanced users believe that permanent access to the internet should be a right protected by law at the national level. Some participants believe that biometrics and the collection of personal data is a necessity, but because of many cases of data leakage due to corruption, it is necessary to ensure and strengthen database security. Advanced internet users mention digital surveillance by the authorities and website blocks, which they see as a violation of privacy, and speak of the need for a clear regulatory framework to justify blocking.

Overview

As part of the "Internet Use in Kazakhstan" study, Sange Research Center conducted focus group discussions to understand the importance and utility of the internet for Kazakhstanis, its place in media consumption, Kazakhstanis' preferred language and content, and the effects of internet shutdowns on citizens.

The focus groups considered the following aspects in detail:

- Kazakhstanis' internet use
- Online media consumption
- Preferred content language, including the quality of content in Kazakh
- Sources of information, credibility of content, and fact-checking
- Internet shutdowns, including impact on citizens, alternative sources of information, and internet connectivity
- Digital rights

Methodology

The target cities for the focus groups were Astana, Almaty, Atyrau, and Shymkent. Three focus groups took place in each of these cities, amounting to 12 focus group discussions (FGDs). They were conducted between May 21, 2022, and June 4, 2022.

Composition of participants

In each city, participants were divided into different discussion groups depending on their internet experience. The first group (FGD 1) consisted of participants with basic internet skills on mobile devices (mostly reading, viewing, listening); this group is referred to as "mobile users" throughout the report. The second group (FGD 2)

consisted of participants with basic internet skills on mobile and other devices (tablet, laptop, PC, etc.), knowledge of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) for safe internet connection, and ability to comment and post content; this group is referred to as users of multiple platforms throughout the report. The third group (FGD 3) consisted of active internet users with advanced skills, including knowledge of VPNs and creation of profiles, campaigns, comments, websites, chat bots, software, and IT products; this group is referred to as “advanced internet users” throughout the report.

Each group was roughly gender balanced, with a range of ages, education levels, ethnic backgrounds, and occupations represented.

The primary language of the FGDs in Astana and Almaty was Russian. In Atyrau and Shymkent, the FGDs were conducted in Kazakh, but at the request of non-Kazakh participants and with consent of other participants, Russian was also used, if necessary, with the moderator or her assistant interpreting questions.

Selection of participants

The preliminary selection of participants was based on a screening questionnaire, which considered the following selection criteria: participation in FGDs within the past 12 months (a requirement prohibited participation in FGDs within the past 12 months), city of residence, gender, age, nationality, language, education, internet skills, occupation, financial situation, and willingness to participate in a collective discussion of these issues. Twenty participants were pre-registered for each FGD. Those participants who met all criteria were selected. In total, 10-12 participants were selected for each FGD, of which 8-10 were main participants and two were reserve participants. All participants in the FGDs gave written and informed consent to participate in the study.

More information on the number and composition of participants by city and focus group is provided in Appendix A: Methodology.

Discussion Plans for FGDs

The FGDs were based on two customized discussion guides (see Appendix B) in Kazakh and Russian, which included eight main sections. Slightly different versions of the guide were used for each group, as it was assumed that advanced users were more knowledgeable about internet-related topics.

	Main sections of the discussion guide	Subsections
1	Introduction	FGD objectives, participants' introductions, focus group rules
2	Warm up	<i>Basic users:</i> interesting information on the internet <i>Advanced users:</i> level of internet use, IT technologies
3	Internet use and its role	<i>Basic/advanced:</i> identifying what the internet is used for (information search, communication, entertainment, education, work, business, services, etc.); platforms, sources, websites (availability and quality) <u>Media consumption</u> <i>Basic users:</i> internet sources compared to other forms of media <i>Advanced:</i> credibility of different information sources
4	Language of the content	<i>Basic/advanced:</i> preferred language of content, sufficiency of content in Kazakh, quality of content in Kazakh, demand for content in Kazakh, credibility of content in a particular language <i>Advanced:</i> digital Kazakhstan - problems and perspectives.
5	Internet content sources	<i>Basic/advanced:</i> differentiating information based on source (local, Western, Russian, and other sources). Credibility of information based on source <i>Advanced:</i> fact-checking
6	Internet shutdowns	<i>Basic:</i> effects of internet shutdowns on citizens; which services were lacking; the search for alternative news sources; VPN usage; and security checks <i>Advanced:</i> effects of internet shutdowns on citizens; which services were lacking; steps taken to bypass internet restrictions; use of VPN and proxy servers; and security checks
7	Digital rights	<i>Basic/advanced:</i> The internet as a right or a service, the legality of internet shutdowns and website blocking. Security of personal data <i>Advanced:</i> digital empowerment, willingness to defend digital rights

In 2021, the National Statistics Bureau reported 19 million mobile subscribers with internet access in Kazakhstan.² In 2020, the share of internet users in villages versus cities was at the same level (92 percent), far above the world average (39 percent) and the level of internet use in Europe (80 percent) or on the American continents (60 percent).³ According to Kazakhstan's Bureau of National Statistics, the urban-vs-rural gap in mobile phone usage in 2020 was minimal, with 96.2 percent use in urban areas and 95.4 percent use in rural areas.⁴

A law passed in 2009 classified all internet sources, including social media, as forms of mass media, thus subjecting them to the regulations and restrictions that apply to mass media such as television, radio, and print media.⁵ This means that individual social media users are legally responsible for content in the same manner as journalists. Because individual social media users do not possess the privileges associated with the legal status of a journalist, users can be unjustly penalized.⁶ The law also mandates that public authorities can identify and restrict internet access to opposition-minded media on a case-by-case basis.⁷ and websites of opposition-minded media⁹ are also often blocked.

Internet shutdowns are used by Kazakhstani authorities to suppress the free exchange of information during politically important times and during protests,¹⁰ including during the presidential elections in 2019¹¹ when Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram were blocked. At the onset of the 2020 pandemic, authorities prosecuted doctors for spreading information about the coronavirus and complaints from medical personnel about the lack of personal protective equipment.¹² In 2020, the authorities obligated the owners of domain names ending with .kz to situate server equipment inside the country in order to make website blocking possible. In addition to internet shutdowns, as revealed by an international

² <https://stat.gov.kz/official/industry/19/statistic/5>

Communication statistics / Number of internet subscribers / Main indicators / Number of internet subscribers (table "6. Number of fixed Internet subscribers") / 2021

³ <https://finprom.kz/ru/article/kazahstanskije-sela-vo-vsemirnoj-pautine-mobilnym-internetom-polzuyutsya-9-iz-10-selskih-domohozyajstv-eto-odin-iz-luchshih-pokazatelej-v-mire>

⁴ <https://stat.gov.kz/official/industry/19/statistic/5>

Statistics of Information and Communication Technologies. Tables "On the use of information and communication technologies by households in the Republic of Kazakhstan." 2021 and 2020

⁵ <http://law.gov.kz/client/#!/doc/3749/rus/06.02.2009>

⁶ Nothing new in the 'New Kazakhstan' as attacks on social media freedom continue · Global Voices

⁷ <https://www.openglobalrights.org/how-kazakhstans-control-of-information-can-turn-into-a-regime-weakness/?lang=Russian>

⁸ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/freedom-house-freedom-on-the-net-2020-kazakhstan/30892208.html>

⁹ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31639126.html>

¹⁰ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/o-paranoikah-u-vlasti-blokirovka-sotssetey-i-rol-i-rossii-v-podavlenii-internet-svobody-v-kazahstane/31482692.html>

¹¹ <https://www.openglobalrights.org/how-kazakhstans-control-of-information-can-turn-into-a-regime-weakness/?lang=Russian>

¹² <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/30678012.html>

investigation conducted jointly by Forbidden Stories, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), and Amnesty International¹³ in 2021, the authorities monitored political activists using Pegasus spyware. The Ministry of Internal Affairs confirmed the use of special equipment and software to monitor “illegal” content on the internet, for which search bots were used to identify specific content that the government deems a threat to state security or incitement of conflict.¹⁴

In 2020 and 2021, Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net report designated Kazakhstan as “not free,” where “social networks, [and] communication platforms are blocked, [and] bloggers, human rights defenders and critics of power are persecuted,” where “authorities organize troll attacks,” and where human rights organizations are subjected to state-affiliated attacks that make websites unavailable.¹⁵ The Ministry of Information and Public Development, while denying involvement in specific instances of website blocking, confirms that it can issue official orders to telecommunications operators.¹⁶

The 2004 Law on Communication specifies that the National Security Committee, the General Prosecutor’s Office, the Defense Ministry, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs have the right to restrict or suspend the operations of communication networks and media during so-called emergency situations.¹⁷ In fact, security forces in Kazakhstan can restrict the operation of mobile operators’ equipment on their own authority¹⁸ by sending an order to each telecommunications operator who must then manually disable the equipment. In these instances, it is impossible to use a VPN or proxy to bypass the shutdown, effectively cutting off internet access.

During the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, authorities blocked many of the few remaining independent news sites, which precipitated reports from VPN providers of record-breaking demand for their services in the country.¹⁹ But the subsequent total internet shutdown, undertaken by the authorities in what they called “the interests of anti-terrorism and public security,” was unprecedented.

As mentioned in the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights report, “Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human

¹³ <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/o-paranoikah-u-vlasti-blokirovkah-sotssetey-i-rol-i-rossii-v-podavlenii-internet-svobody-v-kazahstane/31482692.html>

¹⁴ <https://profit.kz/news/62632/lspolzovanie-specoborudovaniya-dlya-monitoringa-socsetej-podtverdili-v-MVD/>

¹⁵ Kazakhstan: Freedom on the Net 2021 Country Report | Freedom House

¹⁶ <https://fergana.ru/news/124724/>

¹⁷ Law on Communication, Article 9 https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=1049207&pos=475;-50#pos=475;-50&sdoc_params=text%3D%25D1%2583%25D0%25B3%25D1%2580%25D0%25BE%25D0%25B7%26mode%3Dindoc%26to pic_id%3D1049207%26spos%3D1%26tSynonym%3D1%26tShort%3D1%26tSuffix%3D1&sdoc_pos=0 ;

<https://vlast.kz/obsshestvo/49623-pervyj-kazahstanskij-internet-satdaun.html?ysclid=l56e8quiqu950678880>, Первый казахстанский интернет-шатдаун - Аналитический интернет-журнал Власть (vlast.kz)

¹⁸ <https://www.forbes.ru/tekhnologii/452093-internet-po-raspisaniju-i-otklucenia-vrucnuu-kak-blokiruut-svaz-v-kazahstane>

¹⁹ <https://www.openglobalrights.org/how-kazakhstans-control-of-information-can-turn-into-a-regime-weakness/?lang=Russian>

rights," shutdowns are markers of sharp deterioration in human rights.²⁰ In January, the shutdown left citizens without access to health care, education, payments and purchases, communication, freedom of expression, and access to information. The official explanation was that blocking was necessary to disrupt coordination among criminal groups, who were allegedly involved in the unrest. The shutdown aggravated the situation, and citizens took to the streets to obtain information. They began looking for alternative sources of connection to the internet, since the information vacuum increased fear and misunderstanding.

In connection with the sanctions against Russia for its continued military aggression against Ukraine, some users of social networks in Kazakhstan expressed fear that the potential to disconnect Russia from the internet – as proposed by some Ukrainian politicians²¹ – could affect Kazakhstan, because Kazakhstan's access to internet is through Russia²².

In light of this context, the objective of this qualitative study is both timely and important—to learn more about the meaning of the internet for Kazakhstanis, its role, whether users pay attention to who is producing content, attitudes toward internet shutdowns, and awareness of their digital rights.

²⁰ « Internet shutdowns: trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights», Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/341/55/PDF/G2234155.pdf?OpenElement>

²¹ <https://thebell.io/grozit-li-nam-suverenny-runet-kak-platit-za-rubezhom-i-novye-instrumenty-dlya-poiska-fotofeykov>,
<https://www.icann.org/en/system/files/correspondence/fedorov-to-marby-28feb22-en.pdf>

²² <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/31767819.html>, <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2022/03/09/v-kazahstane-opasayutsya-otklyucheniya-interneta-vsled-za-rossiyey>

Media Consumption and Internet Accessibility

Finding 1. Among study participants, most media consumption takes place online.

The internet is the primary means of media consumption for most basic users in the study. Sixty-five to 85 percent of the “basic user” study participants in Shymkent rely mostly on the internet. Those numbers are 75-95 percent in Atyrau, about 80-95 percent in Almaty, and 65-70 percent in Astana. Among advanced users participating in this study, that number is even higher, at 97-100 percent.

In general, access to the internet in Kazakhstan is not considered expensive, but the quality varies widely depending on the location. High-speed internet is accessible only in large cities. In rural areas, the internet is either not available or is very slow; furthermore, the quality of mobile internet depends on the operator, especially in rural regions. An active presence on social media quickly uses up mobile data, at which point users must rely on Wi-Fi. According to some users, the internet in Kazakhstan, relative to other countries, is cheap, and the quality is sufficient. Others consider the cost of mobile connection to be quite high, especially when they factor in the cost of mobile internet for a family with many children. In Kazakhstan, the largest landlocked country in the world, where stark variations in topography can make transportation and communications challenging, many inter-city roads and rural areas are not covered by mobile operators because of insufficient number of towers and internet cables, which makes it impossible to bring the internet to these regions. This is seen as the basis for digital inequality.

- Internet use
 - *"80-90 percent [of media consumption] is the internet... I watch TV a little and mostly entertainment programs on STS or TNT."*²³ (Female, 42, Almaty, higher education, accountant, mobile internet user)
 - *"5 percent is radio... 10 percent is TV... 75 percent is internet. As many already said, it has everything: information, entertainment, etc."* (Male, 29, Atyrau, higher education, journalist, mobile user).
- Cost
 - *"My home internet at the current speed, is very cheap... We have the cheapest internet in the region."* (Male, 32, Almaty, secondary technical education, manager, mobile user)

²³ Quotes cited in this report have been translated and may have been minimally edited for clarity or brevity. The speaker's original contribution, including any errors in word choice or grammar, has been preserved to the largest extent possible.

- *"As we already said, the cost of wireless internet, Beeline, Kazakhtelecom, Altel, is good, but mobile internet is expensive, I think."* (Male, 30, Shymkent, higher education, sociologist, mobile user)
- Internet Access
 - *"I am curious why ... I always hear that the quality is presumably terrible, I don't have problems with the internet at all...My home internet is great."* (Male, Atyrau, higher education, freelance, advanced user)
 - *"Data ends quickly, it's enough for me, because I still have home internet. So I switch from mobile internet to home Wi-Fi and vice versa...if I didn't have Wi-Fi, it wouldn't be enough."* (Female, 60, Shymkent, secondary technical education, pensioner, mobile user)



"Those who live in the city – more or less we have the internet, all services are available. But when you communicate with guys from the countryside...they are poor, especially with the last pandemic. All this showed how badly the internet works in our country... Some people have to climb hills to get a signal." (Female, 38, Almaty, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms user)

Internet Use and Its Role

Finding 2. Participants, all of whom are internet users, feel that the daily lives of most people living in cities in Kazakhstan is, in one way or another, dependent on the internet. The internet is seen as an essential tool for work, communication, and leisure. The internet has become an integral part of life for most Kazakhstani internet users: *"It's like the air we breathe!"* (Male, 31, Astana, higher education, developer, advanced user). The main reasons for using the internet in Kazakhstan are work, business, news and information, online banking, communication, entertainment, education, service provision, and the purchase of goods. Communication through social networks and messaging apps is important for study participants. Communication takes place mainly on messaging apps. Members of all groups use WhatsApp, and some use Telegram. Advanced users also mention virtual reality, NFTs, and financial transactions using cryptocurrency. In sum, most spheres of life have shifted into an online format, and it is clear that the internet plays an important role, mainly positive, in the lives of every Kazakhstani and the nation as a whole.

- *"Basically, I watch breaking news, news that is hot at one point or another. So that we could discuss it when everyone meets, so everyone can express their*

opinions about it - 'what do you think about it?'" (Female, 30, Astana, higher education, freelancer, multiple platforms user)

- *"I use it for work. My work is also connected to the internet, because it is a pharmacy warehouse and we have to process requests and so on." (Male, 24, Atyrau, medical college student, part-time job at a pharmacy, multiple platforms user)*
- *"I primarily watch movies and TV shows. Watching movies is as common to me as eating with a spoon." (Male, 33, Astana, higher education, architect, multiple platforms user)*

Sub finding A) Study participants use the internet for entertainment. Watching movies, TV series, videos, and listening to music, including paid content is very common in Kazakhstan, especially on YouTube and movie-screening platforms such as GidOnline, KinoGo, and others, as well as pirated content. Male participants in all four cities where the study took place spend a significant amount of their leisure time playing video games, sometimes as a means of income.

- *"I use the internet for entertainment - short films, interesting facts, wise quotes, etc. Also, to watch old Kazakh films with meaning." (Female, 27, Atyrau, higher education, professor/teacher, mobile user)*
- *"I listen only to American music via VK, Spotify, and sometimes YouTube. I also use Telegram, there is a group for people my age." (Male, 20, Atyrau, student, mobile user)*
- *"It's a good and useful thing - games. No matter what age you are, 25, 35 or 45 - it develops both motor skills and internal thinking, strategic analysis, creativity...." (Male, 25, Atyrau, higher education, system administrator, advanced user)*

Sub finding B) Study participants also use the internet for work, education, and the procurement of goods and services. The internet is widely used in schools and universities for online teaching, in all manner of financial and government services, and in commerce. Some participants use the internet for online business ventures and to generate income.

- *"First of all, we use it in schools to teach children. I teach computer science; it is directly related to the internet and computers. I look for various tasks and examples to explain them something. Now I teach children coding in BASIC or teach other programming languages and software. I also have a job in SMM,²⁴in social networks." (Male, age unknown, Shymkent, elementary school teacher, advanced user)*

²⁴ SMM – social media marketing.

- *"The teachers also use Bilimland. They have video lessons. There is OnlineMektep. There are also downloadable materials available for general viewing."* (Female, 43, Atyrau, higher education, professor/teacher, mobile user)
- *"It used to be a problem for us to get documents, information, and now I use eGov and it is more convenient. I get all the necessary information quickly, IE,²⁵ or paying taxes, from home."* (Female, Shymkent, age, occupation, and education level unknown, multiple platforms user)
- *"The [government services] website is really terrible, not user-friendly, low speed, weak servers, navigation is not intuitive, it is not clear where you need to go and what you need to press. It becomes confusing. The design is wrong. I don't like it."* (Male, Atyrau, 20 year old, student, secondary education, mobile user)
- *"The most important use of the internet for me is to earn money, to always have money in my pocket."* (Male, 22, Atyrau, student, TikTok, advanced user)
- *"I personally haven't shopped offline for seven to eight years now. I don't go to Evrika, Technodom, Sulpak. I order everything via Kaspi, pay cash or choose an installment plan. And if I need to order food, mostly pizza or sushi, I use Glovo or Wolt."* (Male, 30, Shymkent, higher education, sociologist, mobile user)

Sub finding C) In addition to using the internet for academic studies, participants also mentioned training and informal learning online. Many participants use the internet for self-development, acquiring new knowledge and skills, and learning how to make or do something. Many Kazakhstanis also receive additional education online, using the internet to acquire new skills and professions, especially during the pandemic. Some people receive professional training via short courses allowing them to learn independently. Advanced users, however, refer to some types of training as "infogypsyism,"²⁶ when coaches and lecturers earn money by offering expensive courses on personal development, which, in the opinion of advanced users, do not help people.

²⁵ IE – individual entrepreneur.

²⁶ Infogypsyism is the English translation of a Russian word that describes the phenomenon of social media personalities and life coaches selling personal development material that many users perceive as misleading or unhelpful.

- *"In the evenings, I undergo training in all areas: psychology, business, medical education, there are all sorts of specialists, even from Russia, from abroad. And it helps me very much."* (Female, Shymkent, age, occupation, and education level unknown, multiple platforms user)
- *"I learned to play a Kazakh national instrument - dombra, and also learned to play guitar via YouTube".* (Male, 24, Almaty, sales department, education level unknown, mobile user)
- *"There are special websites. There is an industry. But sometimes it is called infobusiness, there is an expression - "infogypsyism," trainings on how to "become successful," "step out of the comfort zone"."* (Female 27, Almaty, specialist in digital security, higher education, advanced user)

Sub finding D) Personal accounts on social media are often linked to jobs. They are used to promote oneself as a specialist or to showcase oneself as a person with certain interests, with a specific audience. People mostly share entertainment and personal information of little social and political significance. Very few participants use the internet to express their opinions in the form of public comments; they prefer not to leave comments, although they read the posts. Commenting is often perceived as leaving negative feedback, and young people view it as a waste of time. Also, people tend not to comment on posts on social media as they expect attacks, insults, or accusations of being a bot. Commenting as an expression of point of view may cause subconscious fear of punishment reinforced by recent events in Kazakhstan (Zhanaozen, the land protests in Atyrau in 2016, January events). In addition, employers often discourage posting. In one of the focus groups in Atyrau, a participant who works for a government institution stated that government workers are forbidden to leave comments on social media, and another participant from Astana said that they are monitored.

- *"I also love social networks. I post short videos of good places I go to on Instagram. When I see something, I start filming. I watch and I make videos."* (Female, 37, Astana, entrepreneur, higher education, mobile user)
- *"I have an account where I post information about myself, including my work-related activities... All my friends get updates about what is happening and can quickly share the news."* (Female, 30, Astana, higher education, psychologist, mobile user)
- *"Many write sarcastic, nasty things. Is it normal for a person to write this? I heard that [internet trolls] have to write a certain number of comments per day."* (Female, 51, Almaty, higher education, entrepreneur, advanced user)

- *"When discussing the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, I wrote a comment in defense of Ukraine. They defend their land. If we are attacked, we will defend our land too, right?! If they start a war, we will fight, even if there are fewer of us." (Male, 43, Almaty, higher education, professor/teacher, mobile user)*
- *"Sometimes when I read comments, I lose my temper and comment. But I do not swear, I simply express my position. I don't point to others, I don't say that they are right or wrong, because everyone has his/her own opinion - so many men, so many minds." (Female, 27, Atyrau, high school education, service provision, on maternity leave, multiple platforms user)*

Sub finding E) Many study participants follow the news and often associate the internet with news delivery. Users often turn to the internet for news and information. For basic internet users, the latest news about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is of high interest, often attracting greater interest than the news from Kazakhstan, though domestic news is important for other categories of internet users in this study. Some participants avoid what they perceive to be negative news. There were several participants who highlighted the importance of political news from Kazakhstan. News consumption habits vary greatly.

- *"I'm especially [interested in] what is happening now in our country. Now everyone is talking about New Kazakhstan. It is interesting what change will happen in New Kazakhstan, what changes are there..." (Male, 23, Shymkent, occupation and education level unknown, advanced user)*
- *"The "Russia and Ukraine" news is probably most important now and then all other news. We just have to look everywhere on the internet." (Female, 53, Shymkent, librarian, education level unknown, mobile user)*
- *"I'm interested in economic news. For example, car loans at 4 percent or an increase in prices of certain products, like sugar. I am not lazy, so I browse, I read news like that thoroughly." (Male, 29, Atyrau, higher education, self-employed, multiple platforms user)*
- *"I read the news, but I don't go deeper, just the headlines, because it's hard... It affects the mood." (Female, 42, Almaty, higher education, accountant, mobile user)*

Sub finding F) Online financial and banking services are an integral part of life for study participants. Kaspi, Homebank (Halyk), Eurasian, BCC, Otbas Bank, Kazpost, Jusan, Sberbank, and Qiwi wallet are among the most popular online banking apps named by participants. Participants in Shymkent were very enthusiastic about the eGov services available via Kaspi. In one of the groups in Shymkent, internet banking did not come up. However, it became clear in later discussion that all focus group members still made frequent purchases and transfers via online banking. With the advent of a wide range of payment methods, such as transfers by phone number, QR-code, etc., many participants frequently use cashless transactions. Kaspi Bank's mobile banking app is considered a financial breakthrough.

- *"It is impossible not to mention Kaspi. In addition to being able to transfer money without any problems, you can also pay your utility bill there... People use it to sell cars already. You don't have to go to the Citizen Service Center anymore, you can sell your car user license [i.e., the right to use a car] or transfer ownership via the Kaspi application. It's amazing!"* (Male, 36, Almaty, higher education, designer, advanced user).
- *"I use different mobile bank apps to make payments via the internet. It is convenient, you don't have to stand in line, you can make payments or get any services without having to leave the house."* (Female, 37, Atyrau, secondary specialized education, nail technician, mobile user)

Sub finding G) More complex use of online platforms and services was discussed only in focus groups with advanced internet users. Participants mentioned such innovations as virtual reality, cryptocurrency (mentioned under various commercial names), data mining, meta-verse, NFT (non-fungible token), 5G, machine learning, Miro, and several cloud services, such as mail, data storage, collaboration platforms for coworkers and clients, modern workplace collaboration platforms, online calendars, videoconferencing services (Google Meet, Zoom), online QR-code generation, Figma, and many more.

- *"I can say that a new meta-universe has emerged, also in the field of NFTs. The meta-universe includes avatars that we all use now. You buy these avatars and you're in the meta-universe, you as a person. You can make money, build homes. It is the future."* (Male, 20, Almaty, high school, IT, advanced user)
- *"Machine learning is quite an interesting topic, it has applications in many areas, in cyber-security, behavioral analysis."* (Female, 27, Almaty, college/university not completed, specialist in digital security, advanced user)

Sub finding H) Some participants voiced the opinion that the internet, due to the abundance of information it provides, takes away from work, recreation, and creativity. Negative effects are seen in some areas of life – participants say that it distracts from work, deprives young people of critical thinking skills, and wastes time. While some posit that the internet has made life easier for children and adolescents, others believe that it reduces critical thinking and the development of deep and serious interests. Some participants limit their internet use temporarily or permanently. According to some participants, the use of social media and video games among children leads to obscene language, psychological issues, and problems at school. But others are certain that their limiting of access to internet is aimed at restricting access to certain content for children.

- *"Young people today do not want to look for anything. The most important thing is to finish everything quickly, the most important thing is to make good money, get rich quickly. That's it! There are no other interests. They do not*

study, are not interested in anything and do not look for anything." (Female, age unknown, Shymkent, student, secondary education, advanced user).

- *"You think you're using it right and then you're stuck watching different videos on YouTube Shorts, Instagram, TikTok, and you realize you're wasting your time on pointless stuff."* (Male, 20, Atyrau, student, robotics teacher, advanced user)
- *"I do not have WhatsApp. I removed it for good because it really interfered with my life, work. It consumed me completely from morning till evening. I deleted Facebook, Moi Mir, Instagram."* (Male, 38, Almaty, biologist, higher education, multiple platforms user).
- *"I strongly oppose the fact that children under the age of 13 are using social media. Because there are some, to put it mildly, abnormal people on social media. They spend time playing Dota, get wrong ideas, negativity."* (Male, 22, Atyrau, secondary education, Tik Tok content creator, advanced user)



"The Internet is just an amazing tool, a human creation that unites all the knowledge of mankind." (Male, 20, Atyrau, student, robotics teacher, advanced user)

Content Sources and Trust in Information

Finding 3. Basic internet users do not distinguish between sources of content, while more advanced users fact-check. Participants of all levels of use expressed doubt about the validity of the information available online. The very question of who or what creates content was difficult to understand for basic users. This was particularly noticeable among older participants and women. Many basic internet users in this study do not differentiate between the sources of information. For these participants, the question of who is behind the content was difficult to answer, and this was the first time many of them gave it a thought. Most participants do not have a particular source of media, whether platform or specific outlet, that they trust to a great extent, and they believe this is normal. Some trust official sources, while others believe that all official sources are lying. There are those who trust internet sources and those who put more trust in television. Some believe in content shared by bloggers, and some believe that all bloggers are "bought." Some participants do not read the news because they do not find it credible and do find it negative. Their primary source of information is their relatives, whom they trust the most. Some expressed the opinion that politics and ideology are slippery topics, and that it is necessary to clearly distinguish between sources of information. Kazakhstanis who receive news via the internet do not trust it as they believe that there is a lot of fake news.

- *"Even if I read or watch any news, I keep neutral about everything, because the internet is now littered with fakes. Especially political ones."* (Male, 32, Almaty, secondary vocational education, department head in a private company, mobile user)
- *"I see the news, I can react to it, but I don't think about whether to believe it or not. You're just discussing it... all this is not worth trusting, there is no truth in there."* (Female, 34, Atyrau, secondary education, school administration, multiple platforms user)

Sub finding A) Advanced users as well as younger active internet users have more understanding of content sources than other groups. These participants check and filter information, and they use fact-checking and a variety of sources.

- *"I personally don't ask myself who is behind the news, because if there is some interesting piece of news, I always try to find a description of this piece from the other side, that is, from several sides. And already from these various descriptions, let's say, [I] analyze what is really true, or damn, even think on some version of my own."* (Male, 37, Atyrau, higher education, freelancer, advanced user).
- *"We look at the delivery – we look at the content, it can be some kind of ...ad...and you won't understand that it's advertising, it can be somehow delivered as social, and you won't understand that there is some kind of a political thing 'planted' in there... It is obvious that while pursuing a specific purpose, in the Russian-language media in different countries, everyone is presenting the same situation from different angles...."* (Female, 37, Almaty, higher education, sales, multiple platforms user).
- *"I try to trust no single one [source]. I try to construct a general picture from three-four-five pieces of information about an event [...] roughly speaking, I use the fact-checking method. So, I have five pieces of news, and, respectively, all of them [are] a little ... different...[but] at points where the information coincides in all five sources, this information is [what] I consider credible..."* (Male, 50, Astana, higher education, Internet Security, advanced user).

Sub finding B) Many participants feel a need to verify information. Many do not fully trust any sources, although some put more trust in Western sources, as they believe Western media is more independent. Still others prefer Kazakhstani or Russian sources. When some participants talk about content and sources, they reference the war between Russia and Ukraine and the January events in Kazakhstan. The influence of Russian media propaganda is evident to some participants. The inexhaustible flow of information from Russia through television and the internet influences those who do not filter sources of information. Some representatives of minority ethnic groups believe that official channels from Russia [federal channels] "cannot lie." Most users

do not think about who produces content, which allows malign actors to benefit from destabilizing the situation in the country.

- *"American mass media express their views more openly; they have many channels. All the Russian ones are under total control. The Kazakhstan ones are a little bit more free than Russian. But they also cannot cross a line."* (Male, 20, Atyrau, incomplete higher education, student, internet usage level unknown).
- *"I guess we trust our own local sources more. I would say I'd [search...] this information on Kazakhstani or Russian platforms, rather than some foreign²⁷ information. First of all, the foreign mentality is different They see us differently, deliver news differently. That's why I'd rather read news on [our] Kazakhstani or Russian websites..."* (Female, 53, Shymkent, higher education, librarian, mobile user).
- *"[...When] they were talking about the invasion of Ukraine, I honestly was laughing at first. How could Russia invade Ukraine? Turns out CNN and BBC were talking about this since February? They even gave a date. And now I understand that they were giving credible information, ... I stopped trusting the Russian ones, as they started closing all the independent media, everything in there is pro-government..."* (Male, 26, Shymkent, higher education, schoolteacher, advanced user).
- *"We can tell the difference. ... For example, when you see something about the war, [when] Ukrainians are writing 'this is how many Russians were killed', why are they writing that? To raise the combat morale in their country. Russia writes the same kind of information, but about the Ukraine, 'we have won, there [was] combat... And all this information is ambivalent. That's not even a war, but a 'special operation' and in Russia it is prohibited to say 'war.'... Many people are already forming an opinion, that yes, Russia, turns out, is doing [the] right thing. And when they listen to Ukraine - yes...they are protecting themselves..."* (Male, 38, Almaty, higher education, biology scientist, multiple platforms user)
- *"We have already started watching Russian channels in order to hear the truthful information. To listen to ... more or less objective information. For example, if we talk about the war between Russia and Ukraine, Ukraine says one version - that there were that many murders and so on. And the Russian media reveal fakes and show how it really happened..."* (Female, 36, Shymkent, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms user.)

²⁷ By 'foreign' sources the participant likely meant Western sources - this is common among Russian speakers.

- *"During the January events, there was a lot of distorted information, and every side was trying to blacken the other and write their own truth..." (Male, 26, Shymkent, higher education, teacher, advanced user).*

Sub finding C) Some Kazakhstanis believe that official TV channels, newspapers, and government websites provide reliable information, while others have the opposite opinion. In general, participants said that they rarely trust official channels, bloggers, or rumors. This distrust was facilitated by recent events and the COVID-19 pandemic, the January events in Kazakhstan, and the war between Russia and Ukraine. The internet allows one to get information from various sources and fact-check it, and many participants successfully do that. Many participants do not trust bloggers and "random" internet users, preferring instead to receive officially published information, while others trust only bloggers rather than official channels, and treat them like idols.

- *"I find news at official sources. For example, Elorda states: listen to our information. The president, government representatives, akims,²⁸ and so on, if they share information, I will believe them. And if a journalist says something on the street, I won't believe him. Since we have seen it many times -- not everything is true." (Female, 52, Shymkent, higher education, network marketer/teacher, multiple platforms user)*
- *"As a rule, only good news is shown on TV, probably so as not to frighten the people.... For example, if you listen to the news on Channel 24, everything is fine. The same news, but more detailed, is given by Channel 31, that not everything is so good. And you search on the internet, and everything is two times worse. I don't even know what to believe." (Female, 27, Atyrau, secondary education, services employee, multiple platforms user)*
- *"I trust ordinary bloggers more; it depends on the content. When they don't just write 'blah blah' but give links to publications or something else...." (Male, 32, Almaty, vocational education, supply manager, mobile user)*

Sub finding D) Participants trust what they consider to be independent sources such as those who were eyewitnesses, who provided videos and photos as evidence.

- *"Yes, I believe those who saw things with their own eyes and provided information. For example, people are uploading videos [to show] what's going on, on Instagram, on TikTok." (Female, 27, Astana, incomplete higher education, medical worker, multiple platforms user)*

²⁸ An akim is a local government official similar to a mayor.

- *"Tengri news and Dudoser²⁹, they back up everything with video materials. I trust them, not others."* (Female, age unknown, Shymkent, university student, advanced user)



"I can't say that I believe everything I see on the internet. You need to look at independent sources. Non-governmental. Then you need to see where the funding comes from. You watch it on different channels, how it is presented. If possible, then double-check on Wikipedia or on other sites." (Male, 20, Atyrau, incomplete higher education, student, mobile user)

Language of Content

Finding 4. Most participants use the internet in Russian, but Kazakh and English are also commonly relied on, depending on the purpose of use and the region of residence. There is a lack of complex technical, specialized content in the Kazakh language. Many participants watch television shows, movies, and local shows in Kazakh. However, even people who usually speak Kazakh and watch television in Kazakh prefer to receive information in Russian on the internet. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are limitations on internet use in Kazakh, related both to lack of content and the inconvenience of using Kazakh for mobile applications and programs. There is a lot of entertainment content in conversational Kazakh, but the situation is more complicated with professional, specialized fields. Kazakhstanis are mostly bilingual and believe that the amount of quality content in Kazakh on the internet is insufficient, and specifically a scientific, specialized, technical, and popular scientific information is lacking. At the same time, some Kazakh-speaking participants maintain that the quality of information in Kazakh is good and that there is a lot of information available.

- *"There is not enough specialized information about design in Kazakh. Mostly, it is in Russian or English. Only some enthusiasts are doing something [about the lack of information in Kazakh]. Any Kazakh [language learning] courses that come out are sold out right away. There are many people who consume information in Kazakh."* (Male, 36, Almaty, higher education, designer, advanced user)
- *"There's very little material about everything related to science and technology [in Kazakh]. Why is there so little of it? There are very few enthusiasts who popularize it and prepare these materials."* (Male, 50, Astana, higher education, CAICA admin, advanced user)

²⁹ A Kazakhstani news outlet and a Kazakhstani Telegram channel, respectively.

- *"Now we study computer programming, I take the information and translate it myself into Kazakh using Google. For example, there is a task: let's assume you need to build a calculator, to do it, you need to write a code. We take a Russian text and translate it into Kazakh to make it clear to the students. We need to translate specialized information." (Male, age unknown, Shymkent, teacher, advanced user)*

Sub finding A) Kazakh-speaking participants believe that the quality of content in the Kazakh language is quite good, and the dearth of internet content in Kazakh is due to the lack of knowledge of the Kazakh language.

- *"Yes, the quality of content in the Kazakh language is good. They write very well... In Kazakh everything is clear. Kazakh is a very rich language..." (Male, 43, Almaty, higher education, professor, mobile user)*
- *"At first it was difficult, when all the [medical] diagnoses were translated into Kazakh, it was difficult to pronounce, and then we got used to it and learned it." (Female, 45, Almaty, higher education, nurse, mobile user)*

Sub finding B) Many ethnic Kazakhs are bilingual and consume content in Kazakh and Russian. Kazakh-speaking participants from the south and west of Kazakhstan prefer to receive news and post content in Kazakh.

- *"In Shymkent, 70 percent of people watch content in Kazakh, most likely, because they are Kazakhs." (Male, 30, Shymkent, higher education, sociologist, mobile internet user)*
- *"I'm addicted to Kazakh TV series because they are released on aitube.kz. Some are in Kazakh, some in Russian. Half in Kazakh, half in Russian, bilingual, and there are subtitles." (Male, 35, Almaty, secondary technical education, IT, advanced user)*
- *"... Kazakh is important for me. I read mostly only in Kazakh, I write content also only in Kazakh. Sometimes [when] I am looking through information in Russian, if it is related to ethnicity or Kazakh people, then I write comments." (Male, 43, Almaty, higher education, professor, mobile user)*
- *"I do it in Russian. Because in Kazakh I find it difficult to comprehend, I do not understand. Even text messages that I get on the phone regarding tariffs or some bank information, I read [it] and do not understand what it means. I do not know why. Russian is easier to comprehend." (Female, 37, Atyrau, secondary technical education, nail technician, mobile user)*

Sub finding C) A few participants prefer to receive specialized or technical information, as well as entertainment content, in English. Some Almaty participants,

particularly advanced internet users, prefer to receive news and content in English. Very few participants from Almaty use Kazakh for social media, preferring to access broader and deeper content from English-language sources.

- *"Well, the difference in content – there's a lot of it in English. The range is wider. First, I search in Russian, [and] if I can't find it, I switch to English. ... I haven't ever tried to search for content in Kazakh."* (Male, 33, Astana, higher education, architect, multiple platforms user)
- *"By the way, I get information in English at work, [but that's] only because there is no normal content in Russian. Up-to-date content is in English. Everything comes from there. In my profession, everything is from there. [There's] some entertainment in Russian. [But] the latest information is all in English, not even in Russian."* (Male, 36, Almaty, higher education, designer, advanced user)

Sub finding D) Participants' trust in information does not depend on the language of the content, but rather it comes from one's own analysis of the information and/or the source.

- *"Language does not play a role here, the main thing is content and where the full detailed information is. Trust does not depend on the language but on content analysis."* (Male, 29, Atyrau, higher education, self-employed, multiple platforms user)
- *"I look for the information on the website and if its source is some scientific source, I trust it, and it doesn't matter if it is in Kazakh or Russian, I trust [it...]. When searching for information, be sure to look at the source, there is always a link to who wrote it. But also double check...."* (Female, 30, higher education, Shymkent, teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"For example, [whether] it be written in Kazakh or Russian, the most important thing is who writes this information, what website publishes it, it all depends on that."* (Male, 30, Shymkent, higher education, sociologist, mobile internet user)

Internet Shutdowns: Politics or Security?

Finding 5. During the unprecedented internet shutdown in January 2022, participants experienced increased anxiety and fear. Many consider the shutdown a violation of their basic rights. The phrases and words that they, especially women, frequently used to describe their reactions were: "difficult," "I had to put up with it," "it was scary," "it was terrible," "a shock." Many participants realized their own dependence on the internet when it became inaccessible; the shutdown was very disruptive to daily life. Participants in the multiple platforms and advanced user groups used VPNs to gain access to the internet during this time. Opinions on the legitimacy of the January shutdown were divided. Some participants expressed that the shutdown was

a time to 'detoxify' from social media and spend time with their families. Some believe that they were deprived of information and, accordingly, their rights and freedoms were infringed, while some justified the actions of the authorities.

- *"It was really scary; the TV showed the news. On the Khabar channel, the president gave a speech, 'Don't worry, I'll keep everything under control,' he said. But in fact, it was so scary that I just wanted to take the children and leave. Because you don't know what's really going on, you just hear about it. And then, when the internet was back on, then we watched the news on what happened there."* (Female, 28, Shymkent, higher education, sales representative, multiple platforms user)
- *"We worked, but had a nervous breakdown, to be honest. Personally, I myself felt as if [I were] at war. It was scary."* (Female, 52, Shymkent, higher education, network marketer/ teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"It was terrible... I was far away from my parents, I ended up in the very epicenter where these tanks stood, cars on the streets were on fire, and no one could come pick me up, and I also could not contact anyone, because of the shutdown..."* (Female, 18, Almaty, secondary education, student, multiple platforms user)

Sub finding A) The shutdown was total, impacting both fixed internet connections and cellular data, and was very disruptive for study participants. Many perceive the shutdown as a violation of their right to open communication. Study participants report that the shutdown deprived people of the ability to contact friends and relatives.

- *"I think it's wrong [to shut off the internet]. In such difficult situations, on the contrary, communication is needed, it may happen that a child has gone out and cannot be contacted. On the contrary, so that people do not panic, they should be able to contact each other. If turning off the internet is not that bad, then completely shutting the communication network off is wrong."* (Female, 34, Atyrau, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"In any case, the connection should always be available, you cannot just shut it down. ... We couldn't even find out how our relatives, who live far away from us, were doing. You can still somehow manage without the internet, but not without cellular connection."* (Female, 34, Atyrau, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"...[When] the internet doesn't work, people don't know whether it's safe to go out, you cannot contact anyone via WhatsApp or Telegram, or call your husband to pick you up. We were left with our problems on our own. I think this is wrong. Panic starts from this, from the lack of information, you don't*

know what will happen next. It's wrong, it was dangerous." (Male, 30, Atyrau, higher education, e-commerce, advanced user)

Sub finding B) Participants are so accustomed to electronic payments that during the January shutdown they found themselves without money or access to financial services. Internet-based businesses in Kazakhstan suffered during the January shutdown, as did schools and hospitals, and the country's economy was generally affected by the shutdown, participants said.

- *"All our money was in Kaspi [Bank] and the Eurasian Bank. There was no cash to buy bread. People were not ready for this, they hadn't set aside cash for an emergency. We were walking around, looking for ATMs where there was money left, because we needed cash." (Female, 25, Shymkent, PhD student, advanced user)*
- *"Around this time, pensions for the elderly arrived, but banks suspended all transfers and cash withdrawals. It turns out that many were left without money or did not receive payments on time. People had no cash, but for two days they could only make purchases with cash. The economy has been badly affected. From the point of view of ordinary citizens, there were no strong consequences, but from the point of view of the economy, damage was done." (Female, 41, Atyrau, higher education, civil servant, multiple platforms user)*
- *"For example, my brother's business functions on the internet, he couldn't work. Then, accordingly, he couldn't pay his loan on time; couldn't pay his installment plan..." (Female, 52, Shymkent, higher education, network marketer/teacher, multiple platforms user)*

Sub finding C) During the events of January 2022, many Kazakhstanis realized their dependence on the internet. Participants said that they experienced great difficulty as a result of the shutdown because their reliance on the internet meant that the shutdown greatly affected their daily lives.

- *"The first two days it was a complete information vacuum. There was no news, we couldn't understand what was happening and, accordingly, [we] felt anxious... You are sitting there, you are bored, and you don't know what to do with yourself. You sit there and just look at your phone that has no internet connection. For two days I sat and looked at the phone and didn't know what to do ..." (Male, 32, Almaty, secondary vocational education, department head, mobile user)*
- *"Personally, I realized that I was addicted to the internet, because when everything was shut down, we didn't know what to do, we just sat there all*

day long. But I began to read books, talk more with my family.” (Female, 20, Almaty, secondary education, student, multiple platforms user)

- *“It was hard, especially on the first day. It felt like I was cut off from the outside world... you sit trapped in four walls and don’t know what’s happening. At that time, we didn’t have radio at home, the TV didn’t work, it felt like I was in some deserted place. It was scary to go outside on the streets, although I wanted to know what was happening, my family sat at home without any information.” (Female, 41, Atyrau, female, higher education, civil servant, multiple platforms user)*

Sub finding D) For some Kazakhstanis, the shutdown became an opportunity to take a break from the internet, to not work, and to spend time with their families. Some participants expressed a positive attitude about the impact of the shutdown.

- *“It also was such a rest for the brain. And when the internet was turned on, I had to work online, and you think ‘maybe they will turn it off again today?’” (Female, 23, Almaty, higher education, self-employed, multiple platforms user)*
- *“The absence of the internet, on the contrary, united us, on the contrary, it was even more fun. We began to see each other more offline, to really talk. No calls, no worries that you need to answer someone, to send a message.” (Male, 25, Astana, higher education, businessman, multiple platforms user)*
- *“Some of my friends said that it was good for them, that they took a break from social networks, from the internet, for some families it even helped them to get together, chat, play board games, for example, we played lotto.” (Male, 22, Atyrau, secondary education, student, Tik-Tok content creator, advanced user)*

Sub finding E) Among advanced users, almost everyone found ways to bypass the shutdowns, primarily using VPNs and proxy servers, and they used Telegram heavily. Even among other, less advanced groups of users there were participants who connected to the internet through a VPN or a proxy server. Many had connected this way in the past since they had previously faced access restrictions and bans of certain sites.

- *“My colleagues and I were sitting together, and someone suggested connecting via VPN. It worked until the evening and then stopped. A friend sent me a message with a link that I followed, and Telegram started working, there was a group chat. With this link, only this group chat in Telegram worked.” (Male, 24, Atyrau, secondary education, medical college student, pharmacist, multiple platforms user)*

- *"..., it was possible to communicate only through Telegram, and the VPN didn't work. Because there was no access at all. Access had been shut down. I've had about six VPNs, and none worked. Only a Telegram server helped, and only for communication, and that's it..."* (Male, 26, Shymkent, higher education, schoolteacher, advanced user)
- *"I... decided ... for myself since that time when we had the first shutdowns of the Internet. For a long time [sighs] since then I pay exactly one dollar a month for my own proxy server. This is the last channel of communication which, in case of emergency, allows me to stay [in touch]."* (Male, 50, Astana, higher education, Internet Security, advanced user)
- *"When the internet is shut down, we use it [a VPN], as we need it then. We download it, use it, and then delete [it.]"* (Female, 27, Astana, incomplete higher education, medical worker, multiple platforms user)

Sub finding F) According to many participants, during the January events civic activists expressed their points of view, and many of them suffered. As a result, some participants have increased their levels of civic activity.

- *"I've heard that the activists went to the protests to get the internet connection back."* (Female, 37, Atyrau, secondary vocational education, nail technician, mobile user)
- *"An acquaintance of my acquaintance in Almaty worked as a journalist, so he was involved in the protests, or rather, he wanted to be closer to the source, and he was imprisoned. Even my sister's friend's son in Almaty accidentally went there and died... I think it's a big tragedy what happened then..."* (Female, 52, Shymkent, higher education, network marketer/teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"They [civic activists] have all already been convicted and are in prison."* (Male, 43, Almaty, higher education, teacher, mobile user)
- *"Many people were detained during the protest. Perhaps there are even those who still have not been released."* (Male, 21, Shymkent, incomplete higher education, private company, mobile user)

Sub finding G) Some participants justified the internet shutdowns as necessary for the maintenance of order, while other participants believe that the shutdowns were a violation of their human rights and democratic freedoms.

- *"From the perspective of the January events, I think the shutdown was legal. If necessary, rights can and should be violated..."* (Male, 35, Almaty, secondary vocational education, IT, advanced user)

- *"I believe that it was necessary for political purposes. There was no internet for about two days, and nobody died from this... They probably wanted to catch the criminals, we don't know for sure. I think it was all done for our own safety, so I think it was right." (Female, 34, Atyrau, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms)*
- *"... I think [access to the internet is] our right. Of course, the state also has certain requirements, such as against radicalism, etc. And the fact that the internet was shut down -- I consider this a violation... I think it showed that our state is authoritarian. In the USSR there was totalitarianism, and now it is authoritarianism. This is a little better." (Male, 29, Atyrau, higher education, journalist, mobile internet user)*
- *"In developed countries, there are no such restrictions [on internet access during protests]. If we want to be a democratic state, then this should not happen." (Male, 20, Atyrau, student, mobile user)*



"They can't handle anything, so they ban things so that I don't realize that they are powerless. Because if they ban something, it means they are afraid of something." (Male, 37, Atyrau, higher education, freelance, advanced user)

Digital Rights

Finding 6. Many advanced users believe that permanent access to the internet should be a right. Some participants express concerns about privacy and the use of biometric data. Many participants consider the internet as a service, but many advanced users consider it a right and believe that it must be codified as such. Some Kazakhstanis believe that the introduction of biometrics and the collection of personal data is a necessity, but they believe there is a risk of data leaks due to corruption, so it is necessary to ensure and strengthen the protection of databases in both government agencies and private companies. Many feel that their personal freedom is threatened by such data collection and view biometrics as an infringement on their rights.

- *"... The state should not limit connection, it should be publicly available. A person should be free. You're responsible for what you write on the internet, But at the same time, freedom of speech should never be restricted. This is our legal right." (Male, Shymkent, 26, higher education, teacher, advanced user)*
- *"They say it's our right, and we hope it is. I believe that we should fight for the internet as our right, they had no right to limit it, because we have the full right*

to use it [The state] will provide it today, and tomorrow - no." (Male, 37, Atyrau, higher education, freelance, advanced user)

Sub finding A) Participants believe that the state should be responsible for ensuring the right to accessible, high-quality internet. At the moment, according to the participants, the state is not ready to codify that right in law.

- *"I think that Kazakhstan is not standing still, it is developing and with it the internet should develop, too. You can't disregard the merits of the state in this regard, but it would be good if the price was reduced, and the speed was increased. Maybe we should make the internet a right, not just a service. It is yet too early to talk about it, because we have the internet and, as a service, it is not available everywhere and not developed."* (Female, 34, Atyrau, higher education, professor, multiple platforms user)
- *"The question is who is going to pay for it all? Because the things that the state provides for free are paid for by us. These are taxes. Nothing is free. I mean, there could be some kind of subsidies for certain groups, based on proof and documentation that this person with disabilities needs it. It's like that. It is possible to turn it into a law, but not within the next five years ... First, we have to have a guaranteed quantity of free internet."* (Male, 50, Astana, higher education, cyber security, advanced user)

Sub finding B) Blocking some websites, including those sites that infringe on copyrights, is puzzling for Kazakhstanis, but it is still perceived as a violation. However, the idea of blocking terrorist websites, websites for drug trafficking, pornography, and so on finds supporters among participants.

- *"It seems to me there are always websites that are banned: terrorists, trafficking. I think, in principle when they block them, I am, on the contrary, all for it."* (Female, 38, Almaty, higher education, teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"I no longer like that they block a lot of things without my knowledge. They try to protect me from everything. I can do it myself, I'm an adult."* (Additional participant, details unknown, Almaty, advanced user)
- *"... It just creates suspicion and more mistrust of the state at the same time. People should use their own filters, so the state doesn't use its filters to decide what to watch and what not to watch... everyone has their own filters, even when it's not about the internet [...] By blocking the internet, they decide for people."* (Male, 36, Atyrau, higher education, information security, advanced user)

Sub finding C) There was some controversy among focus group participants regarding privacy and the use of biometric data. Many users believe that the theft of data by private entities, government agencies, and banks is common in Kazakhstan. All groups mentioned concerns about personal data leaks. Advanced internet users understand the importance of biometric data associated with enhanced cybersecurity. In contrast, basic users oppose the use of biometrics, considering it a violation of rights. Their concern is whether the state can protect personal data. There is also concern among participants about biometrics being used in legal cases.

- *"This is the responsibility of the state. It should carefully protect it so that there are no data leaks. The state must provide security."* (Male, 26, Shymkent, higher education, teacher, advanced user)
- *"There are pros and cons of it [biometrics]. If any crime is committed, the criminal could be found quickly. This is a plus. And minus is that there is a possibility of an attack. Access to the data will be on one server and all the data will be there"* (Male, 24, Almaty, higher education, sales, mobile user)
- *"I'm against it. I don't like it; it's getting into everyone's personal lives... I believe that these are our individual rights, we should not let our personal rights be infringed upon from the outside."* (Female, 52, Shymkent, network marketer/teacher, multiple platforms user)
- *"There will be no freedom, no personal space. In your own country you will not be able to live in peace, you will be like a robot."* (Female, 37, Atyrau, higher education, pharmacy operator, mobile user)

Sub finding D) Some participants believe that it is necessary to defend their digital rights, but many think they will be persecuted. Others believe that there are other more pressing problems in Kazakhstan that need to be addressed.

- *"It is difficult to fight for our rights in Kazakhstan, as well as in Russia and in the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries in general. But, if necessary, you can sign a petition for a free high-quality internet to become our right."* (Male, 37, Atyrau, higher education, freelancer, advanced user)
- *"If you get into it and start expressing your opinion openly, they will come after you."* (Male, 38, Almaty, higher education, biologist, multiple platforms user)
- *"I do not consider the internet as a priority right... We should fight for the right to choose, in general, while for the internet, my personal view, why would we fight for it? We have more serious problems in the country."* (Male, 25, Astana, higher education, entrepreneur, multiple platforms user)



"I consider the internet our right. It is a means of expression for a person. But, of course, there are certain restrictions by the state, against radicalism, etc.... And the fact that the internet was shut down I consider a violation. This is the same as being imprisoned for two days." (Male, 29, Atyrau, higher education, journalist, mobile user)

Conclusions

Urban Kazakhstani internet users have largely switched to receiving information via the internet instead of relying on other media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. The internet penetrates all areas of life, from work to education to entertainment. The internet is as much used for communication as it is for gaining information. Participants turn to the internet for communication via well-known social networks, especially WhatsApp, where they use group chats to talk to relatives, friends, coworkers, and others. Kazakhstanis spend a significant amount of time online and view the internet as an essential tool. The internet impacts Kazakhstanis' daily life in meaningful ways.

Study participants mostly browse the web in Russian, especially when searching for specialized content, since content in Kazakh is often insufficient or does not accurately reflect the essence of the query. Advanced internet users often use English. Regional differences relate primarily to the language used on the internet. If in Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent, users are mainly looking for information in Russian, in Atyrau, Kazakh is mostly used. These data reflect larger societal shifts in national identity and language preferences. Russian is still widely spoken in Kazakhstan, but as the country continues to evaluate its Soviet past, ethnic Kazakhs are eager to promote the Kazakh language as a source of national pride; thus, they continue to seek specialized information online in Kazakh.

In the wake of the pandemic, the January events, and the war in Ukraine, Kazakhstanis pay more attention to sources and verification of information. Distrust of content depending on its source is high, but this differs from user to user. Some Kazakhstanis do not trust official media, others do; some do not trust bloggers, while others do. Some participants express concerns about disinformation, reflecting a critical attitude toward Russian state media that has grown more noticeable since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The January events affected Kazakhstanis psychologically, revealing a deep dependence on the internet, particularly in terms of communication, obtaining information, and financial services. During the internet shutdown, Kazakhstanis experienced heightened anxiety exacerbated by a lack of verifiable information. While many participants, even before the January events, learned to use and grew accustomed to tools such as VPNs and proxy servers to bypass internet shutdowns, others found themselves in digital isolation and worried about their relatives and friends, as they could not communicate via the internet or cellular data. Most Kazakhstanis believe that government action to block internet access is impermissible, identifying shutdowns as contrary to democratic development.

For a large number of participants, the internet is perceived as a service rather than a right; at the same time, a significant number of advanced users recognize the internet as a right and believe that restricting internet access is a violation of democratic principles. Many view access to the internet as a fundamental right, an opinion that holds promise for future democratic development in Kazakhstan.



Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

Between May 21 and June 4, 2022, 12 FGDs were conducted in Astana, Almaty, Atyrau, and Shymkent, with three focus groups in each city.

The purpose of FGDs was to determine the objectives of internet use, its role in the overall media consumption, the preferred language of internet use and users' ability to differentiate content depending on source, the effects of internet shutdowns, and their legitimacy.

The selection of participants was based on a specifically designed screening questionnaire, which considered the following selection criteria: participation in FGDs within the past 12 months (there was a requirement prohibiting participation in FGDs within the past 12 months), city of residence, gender, age, nationality, language, level of education, internet skills, occupation, financial situation, and willingness to participate. All FGD participants gave written and informed consent to participate in the discussions.

In each city, participants were divided into three groups based on their internet skills. Participants were selected to represent a balance of gender, age, level of education, ethnicity, and occupation. The first group (FGD 1) consisted of participants with basic internet skills only on mobile devices (mostly reading, viewing, and listening). The second group (FGD 2) consisted of participants with basic internet skills on mobile and other devices (tablet, laptop, PC, etc., and knowledge of VPNs, ability to write comments and post content (beginner's level). The third group (FGD 3) consisted of active internet users with advanced user skills, including knowledge of VPNs and creation of profiles, campaigns, comments, websites, chat bots, software, and IT products.

The main language of the focus group discussions in Astana and Almaty was Russian, in Atyrau and Shymkent it was Kazakh, but at the request of non-Kazakh participants and with consent of the rest of the group, Russian was also used in discussions in these cities; the moderator and moderator's assistant provided interpretation

Focus Group Composition

Location	Date	Internet Usage	Number of Participants	Gender	Education	Ethnicity	Employment	Economic situation	Comments
Almaty	May 21st	Basic internet usage (reading, browsing, listening), mobile devices only	9	6 women	secondary, specialized secondary, higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Korean	Teacher, private company employees, accountants, pensioner, public catering, Head of Sales, nurse	below average, average	Of the 10 participants who confirmed their participation, one could not attend. He urgently needed to go to another city
				3 men					
Almaty	May 21st	Basic internet Usage, mobile plus other (tablet, laptop, PC etc.)	9	7 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	student, teacher, realtor, self-employed, communications operator, housewife, salesperson,	below average, average	3 men could not come, called to work, or for family reasons
				2 men					
Almaty	June 4	Active and advanced internet usage	10	6 women	specialized secondary, incomplete higher, higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Dargin, Tatar	entrepreneur, private company employers, digital marketing specialist, designers, information security specialist, IT-specialist, social media manager	average	
Astana	June 4	Basic internet usage (reading, browsing, listening), mobile devices only	7	6 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	car mechanic, teacher, civil service, individual entrepreneur	average	10 people were supposed to attend, but due to family circumstances some could not come
				1 man					
Astana	May 21st	Basic internet Usage, mobile plus other (tablet, laptop, PC etc.)	9	7 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	Student, architect self-employed, freelancer	average	
				2 men					
Astana	May 21st	Active and advanced internet usage	7	3 women	incomplete higher, higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian	IT administrator, IT-specialist, developers, web designer	average	10 participants signed up; 1 person could not come for health reasons. 2 participants were unable to attend due to preparations for the referendum.
				4 men					

Atyrau	May 26	Basic internet usage (reading, browsing, listening), mobile devices only	9	7 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	Cameraman, housewife, student, service workers	below average, average	
				2 men					
Atyrau	May 27	Basic internet Usage, mobile plus other (tablet, laptop, PC etc.)	9	7 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	Teacher, civil servant, self-employed, journalist	average	
				2 men					
Atyrau	May 28	Active and advanced internet usage	9	2 women	secondary, higher	mix: Korean, Kazakh, Russian	entrepreneur, blogger, system administrator, information security, electronic commerce, robotics trainer	average	
				7 men					
Shymkent	May 29	Basic internet usage (reading, browsing, listening), mobile devices only	10	6 women	higher, specialized secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Tatar, Kazakh, Russian	pensioner, librarian, sociologist, private company employees, security service, taxi driver, medical worker	average, below average, above average	
				4 men					
Shymkent	May 29	Basic internet Usage, mobile plus other (tablet, laptop, PC etc.)	10	8 women	higher, secondary, incomplete higher	mix: Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek	marketing specialist, designer, sales representative, teacher, tailor	average, below average, above average	
				2 men					
Shymkent	May 27	Active and advanced internet usage	9	3 women	secondary, higher	Kazakh	university employee, student, programmer, employee in a private company, teacher of informatics, SMM manager, photographer	average, below average, above average	11 participants confirmed, two could not attend due to family circumstances

Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide

The internet FGDs were based on two specially designed scenarios in Kazakh and Russian which included eight main sections. For Groups 1 and 2 (basic internet users) and Group 3 (advanced internet users), slightly different scenarios were used, as it was assumed that advanced users were more knowledgeable about internet shutdowns, bypassing internet restrictions, and their digital rights.

Focus group discussion guide

Notes for moderator:

The moderator should emphasize that it is important that the participants speak freely and openly. The participants should understand that their comments, both positive and negative, will be appreciated.

This discussion guide is not a script; rather, the main purpose of this guide is to familiarize the moderator with the questions and issues that we would like to see addressed during the focus groups, and to recommend a general order and flow of the topics to be discussed.

The focus groups themselves should be as free and spontaneous as possible. So long as the moderator investigates the issues in this guide, he/she is free to combine questions, change questions, omit questions that do not seem to be working and add questions in response to interesting trends as they become apparent.

The moderator should aim to get specific and detailed answers through probing and follow-up questions and by encouraging a true exchange of views among the participants. It is important that the moderator conduct a group discussion, not a group interview.

It is similarly important to ensure that the conversation is tolerant of diversity in a group and considerate of anyone's perceived limitations – be it a language, an ethnicity, some disability, religion, home region, sexual orientation, preferred lifestyle, etc.

Please keep the following study objectives in mind throughout the group discussions.

FGDs on internet usage:

The participants recruited to discuss this topic should be divided according to the level of internet usage and language of discussion (according to the selection requirements).

Internet usage and censorship circumvention. What role does the internet play for citizens, and what do they use the internet for (information versus communication, etc.)? Among their total media diet, what role does the internet play versus traditional media? In what languages do participants use the internet, and is this different from the languages for use traditional media in? Do participants notice different information on the internet depending on who is behind the content (e.g., local versus Western versus Russian sources)? How are citizens impacted by the internet shutdowns? How did this impact civil society? What sources of information did participants consult during the shutdown? Do participants know how to use VPNs and, if yes, did they during the internet shutdown, and what was their experience? What steps do “advanced users take to access information?

Internet usage and the impact of internet shutdowns:

Groups 1 and 2 discussion outline

Group 1 - Basic internet usage (basic consumption such as reading, browsing, listening), only on mobile devices

Group 2 - Basic internet usage, on mobile and other devices (tablet, laptop, PC, etc.), knowledge of VPN, ability to write comments, post content (beginner).

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Introduction of moderator and participants
 - *Write down your name (nickname), gender, age, education, occupation, and city on the place card.*
 - *The name is required so that I and the participants can address you during our discussion.*
- Consent: My colleagues have already gone over the consent form with you. Do you still have any questions for me?
- Explanation of the objective of the discussion: We would like to learn about your internet usage.
- Explanation of the “rules” of the discussion:
- Speak freely and openly. All information will remain confidential.
- There are no bad and good opinions. Everyone has the right to speak, please be tolerant and respectful of everyone's opinions, there are no right or wrong answers in focus group discussions.
- Try to take turns when talking, otherwise it will be difficult to make out who talked about what.

- Be as specific as possible, giving specific examples whenever possible.
- Turn off mobile phones, or at least please put them on silent mode.
- Permission for audio/video recording. This is important for the analysis, since it is otherwise impossible to record all the opinions, statements of the participants, and it is very important for the moderator to record everything that will be said.

2. Introduction of participants, setting up the discussion

Objective: to open the discussion and set up participants to discuss the topic

1. Each participant introduces themselves by saying their name (nickname)
2. What was the most interesting thing that you saw on the internet in the last few days?
3. What search engine do you use (Google, Yandex, Yahoo, Bing, mail.ru, etc.) and why? Do you read news from these search engines?
4. How do you usually access the internet (device) and where?

3. Internet usage and its role in a broad sense (40 minutes)

Objective: To gain a better understanding of participants' internet usage and role of the internet for them

Role of the internet in my life

1. What do you usually do online? What do you use internet for, in a broad sense? Think and write down on pieces of paper no more than five purposes for using the internet.
 - Once the participants have finished, everyone should read out their purposes for using the internet and briefly elaborate.
 - Cluster all purposes into groups (communication, getting information/news, games/entertainment, learning, making money, for work, paying for services/shopping, receiving services, etc.)
 - Voice the results.
2. Discussion of clustered groups
 - **News/Information:** what kinds of information/news, what for, on which platforms, websites? Do you leave comments? If yes, why?

- **Communication:** which social networks (TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube) do you use? Which social networks do you like? Which chats, groups, do you belong to? Are you an active member, leaving comments, or are you just browsing the conversation? Why do you leave comments, if you do?
 - **Games/entertainment/leisure:** which games/entertainment? Do you download games/entertainment you are interested in for these purposes? Free or paid?
 - **Education:** which platforms do you use? What are you studying?
 - **Work:** what kind of work? What websites/applications do you use?
 - **Making money:** what websites, platforms? (forex, mining, exchanges crypto exchanges, etc.), digital marketing, promotion, website development, advertising.
 - **Business:** promoting your own business on the internet? Which websites/applications do you use?
 - **Receiving services:** which services? Which websites?
 - **Banking:** Kaspi, other banking applications?
 - **Government services:** egov, UAPF, DamuMed, INDIGO (preschool enrollment), adilet.kz, public procurement website and others?
 - **Online shops:** Which shops? Do you use them or not? If not, why?
Are there any preferences among domestic ones?
 - **Payment for services/purchases/delivery:** which services? Which applications?
 - **Others?**
3. What can you say about the accessibility (price, connectivity) and quality (speed, stability) of your internet connection? What kind of quality should your internet connection have? Why?

Media consumption

1. Internet compared to other media (television, print, radio)
 - In addition to the internet, what other means (channels) of communication and information do you currently use?

- Can you roughly estimate the proportions the online sources, TV, radio, printed publications make out to all your information channels?
- Which sources do you trust the most? Why?

Language of content (content, subject-matter) (10 minutes)

1. When using the internet, do you pay attention to the language of the content and is it important to you? Why?

Moderator: it is necessary to clarify: for what kinds of information is the language important? For example, what language is needed to get information? For education, for communication in social networks, for entertainment, for shopping, etc.?

2. In which language do you prefer to receive the information you are interested in? Why?
3. Is there enough content in your preferred language? Why? What content is missing in which language?
4. Is there quality content in Kazakh about the situation in the world? Please name the sources.
5. Is there a need for better content in Kazakh?
6. What can you say about the quality of content (terminology, understandability, completeness, relevance) in a particular language? Provide examples.
7. What can you say about the authenticity of content in a particular language? Provide examples.
8. Is there any difference between the languages you use on the internet compared to traditional media (television, newspapers/magazines, radio)? If yes, why?

Internet by content source (20 minutes)

Objectives: Examine if participants notice different information on the internet depending on who produces the content (e.g., local versus Western versus Russian sources).

1. Different content creators create information on the internet in any language. These creators can be local (Kazakhstani) sources, Western (BBC, RFE / RL), Russian, Turkish, Arabic (Al Jazeera), Chinese, Ukrainian, etc.
 - How do you differentiate information on the internet based on who is behind the content?

- What type of news and information you get from the Internet comes from local, Russian, Western, or other foreign media?
 - How do they (content creators) cover news and information (ask about all creators)?
 - Are there differences in the coverage of information? What are they?
 - Whose presentation of information do you like best? Why?
 - Do you trust news and information from all sources on the internet equally or do you trust some more than others? Can you explain why, and give an example?
2. Who do you think benefits from certain content?

Moderator: Together with the participants try to determine what is the agenda, purpose of this or that content named by the participants.

3. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: Is there any media source that you don't use at all for news and information? Which one and why?*
4. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: How often do you use fact-checking (validity check) of information? And how, exactly?*

Shutdowns (20 minutes)

Objectives: Understand if/how participants bypass internet censorship attempts, specifically relating to the internet shutdown.

1. You may remember that in January, internet connection was practically unavailable in most of the country.
 - How did it affect you personally?
 - How were citizens of the country affected by the internet shutdown?
 - How did it affect civil society – activists, NGOs?
2. What internet services were missed the most, which were vital?

Moderator: provide assistance. For example, some people could not call an ambulance, get medication, could not travel around the city, could not access payment services, make bank transfers.

3. How actively did you look for alternative sources of news and internet services during this period?
 - If you actively searched, what sources in particular and what had you found?
 - Are there internet professionals among your friends and acquaintances? What did they recommend doing when the internet went down?
 - Who helped you connect to the internet during the shutdown?
 - Who did you consult, if anyone?
 - Maybe some of you were able to connect to the internet during the shutdown, by your own means? If so, how?

Moderator: don't mention the VPN yourself, but if participants do, ask what the experience was like, good or bad, and in what ways.

- *If they don't mention it*, ask: What do you know about VPNs? What do you know about proxy servers and other methods of circumventing censorship, internet shutdowns?
- Why didn't you use such technologies during the internet shutdown?

Moderator: pay attention to the lack of these alternative technologies, not the fear, need, or interest in accessing blocked content

4. For Group 2. According to our information, some services and programs to bypass shutdowns and internet blocks quickly and chaotically spread among people during the internet shutdown.

How did you check the reliability and safety of such programs? How worried were you about your data when installing such programs? If something happened to your data, please elaborate.

5. Are there activists among you or people you know who promote ideas that are different from the mainstream? What is the internet for them? What are your worries about such people? What have you heard about the bans on the publication or dissemination of information?

6. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: Let's imagine that the internet is shut down again. What will you do, having experienced the January events?*

Digital rights (10 minutes)

1. Would you classify internet access as a right or a service, and why?

Moderator: after discussion, for information: in Finland it is enshrined in the Constitution as a right, at a speed of at least 100 mb/s.

2. Internet shutdowns happen in Kazakhstan at different times and in different regions.

- What do you think about that? Is it legal?
- What rights are violated by internet shutdowns?
- And when blocking certain sites?

3. Security of personal data:

- What is your attitude toward biometrics/digital control (face scanning, fingerprinting, etc.)?
- Leakage of personal data from government agencies, banks, from websites (krisha.kz, kolesa.kz), medical and other organizations. What can you say about it? Have there been cases of leakage of personal data leaks [that you know about]?

4. *Moderator: Ask these questions if there is time left for this section: What do you think about digital rights? How ready are you to defend your digital rights in case of their violation? Do you know how to assert your digital rights? (the right of electronic signature, security of personal data, electronic voting rights, etc.)*

Conclusion (around 5 minutes)

Objective: To elicit open feedback to potentially raise points of importance for participants that were not addressed earlier in the discussion.

Today's discussion was designed to see how you use the internet, what are your sources for news and information, and whether the internet shutdown affected you. We have discussed various issues with you. Perhaps there are other aspects or problems that we have not touched on, but, in your opinion, they are important for our topic.

- Is there anything else that we all need to know to better understand the problems of internet usage in Kazakhstan?

Internet usage and the impact of internet shutdowns Script for the 3rd Group - advanced (experienced) users

Active and advanced use of the internet, including using VPNs, posting profiles, campaigns, comments, etc. Creation of websites, chatbots, programs, IT products.

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Introduction of moderator and participants

Write down your name (nickname), gender, age, education, occupation, city on the place card.

The name is required so that I and the participants can address you during our discussion

- Consent: My colleagues have already gone over the consent form with you. Do you still have any questions for me?
- Explanation of the objective of the discussion: We would like to learn about your internet usage and about difficulties of internet usage during shutdowns and blocks.
- Explanation of the "rules" of the discussion:
- Speak freely and openly. All information will remain confidential.
- There are no bad and good opinions. Everyone has the right to speak, please be tolerant and respectful of everyone's opinions, there are no right or wrong answers in focus group discussions.
- Try to take turns when talking, otherwise it will be difficult to make out who talked about what.
- Be as specific as possible, giving specific examples whenever possible.
- Turn off mobile phones, or please, at least, put them on silent mode.
- Permission for audio/video recording. This is important for the analysis, since it is otherwise impossible to record all the opinions, statements of the participants, and it is very important for the moderator to record everything that will be said.

Introduction of participants, setting up the discussion (10 minutes)

Objective: to open the discussion and set up participants to discuss the topic.

1. Each participant introduces themselves by saying their name (nickname)

2. Tell about your level of IT usage, technologies, the internet: e.g., has their own channel on media platforms, telegram-bot, TikTok, blogs, etc.
3. What new internet technologies do you like lately, including new social networks, promotional opportunities, and digital security?
4. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: What search engine do you use (Google, Yandex, Yahoo, Bing, mail.ru, etc.) and why? Do you read news from these search engines?*

Internet usage and its role in a broad sense (35 minutes)

Objective: To gain a better understanding of participants' internet usage and role of the internet for them

1. What do you usually do online? What do you use internet for in a broad sense? Think and write down on pieces of paper no more than five purposes for using the internet.
 - Once the participants have finished, everyone should read out their purposes for using the internet and briefly elaborate.
 - Cluster all purposes into groups (communication, getting information/news, games/entertainment, learning, making money, for work, paying for services/shopping, receiving services, etc.)
 - Voice the results.
Discussion of clustered groups.
 - **News/Information:** which kinds of information/news, what for, on what platforms, websites? Do you leave comments? If yes, why?
 - **Communication:** which social networks (TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, YouTube) do you use? Which social networks do you like? Which chats, groups do you belong to? Are you an active member, leaving comments, or are you just browsing the conversations? Why do you leave comments, if you do?
 - **Games/entertainment/leisure:** which games/entertainment? Do you download games/entertainment you are interested in for these purposes? Free or paid?
 - **Education:** what platforms do you use? What are you studying?

- **Work:** what kind of work? Which websites/applications do you use?
- **Making money:** which websites, platforms? (forex, mining, exchanges, crypto exchanges, etc.) Digital marketing, promotion, website development, advertising.
- **Business:** promoting your own business on the internet? Which websites/applications do you use?
- **Receiving services:** what services? Which websites?
 - **Banking:** Kaspi, other banking applications
 - **Government services:** egov, UAPF, DamuMed, INDIGO (preschool enrollment), adilet.kz, public procurement website and others
- **Online shops:** Which shops? Do you use them or not? If not, why?

Are there any preferences among domestic ones?

- **Payment for services/purchases/delivery:** which services? Which applications?
- **Others?**

2. What can you say about the accessibility (price, connectivity) and quality (speed, stability) of the internet connection? What the quality of the internet connection should be? Why?
3. What problems have you encountered in using the Kazakhstan internet lately, over the past year?
4. Which sites and services should be available always and free of charge? (Moderator: pay attention to whether they cite government websites or private)
5. Are there activists among you, or people you know, who promote ideas that are different from the mainstream? What is the internet for them? What are your worries about such people? What have you heard about the bans on the publication or dissemination of information?

Media consumption

1. What sources of information, communication channels (online sources, TV, radio, print media) do you trust the most? Why?

Language of content (content, subject-matter) (10 minutes)

1. In what language do you prefer to receive the information you are interested in? Why?
2. What can you say about the quality of content (terminology, understandability, completeness, relevance) in a particular language? Provide examples.
3. What can you say about the authenticity of content in a particular language? Provide examples.
4. How does digital Kazakhstan develop in terms of content and functionality in Kazakh language?

What are the main problems?

Is there a need for better content in Kazakh?

What are the prospects for the Kazakh language in the IT sector?

5. Tell us a little about the content you create online.
 - What makes you leave comments, create profiles or campaigns, create chat rooms, Telegram bots, YouTube channels, TikTok content, etc.?
 - Can you name the specific topics you post about?
 - What platforms do you post on and why?
 - What language do you use when creating your content?
 - What audience are you targeting? Do you have preferences?

Internet by content source (20 minutes)

Objectives: Examine if participants notice different information on the internet depending on who produces the content (e.g., local versus Western versus Russian sources).

1. Different content creators create information on the internet for you in any language. These creators can be local (Kazakhstani) sources, Western (BBC, RFE / RL), Russian, Turkish, Arabic (Al Jazeera), Chinese, Ukrainian, etc.
 - How do you differentiate information on the internet based on who is behind the content?
 - What type of news and information you get from the Internet comes from local, Russian, Western, or other foreign media?
 - How do they (content creators) cover news and information (ask about all creators)?

Are there differences in the coverage of information? What are they?

Whose presentation of information do you like best? Why?

- Do you trust news and information from all sources on the internet equally, or do you trust some more than others? Can you explain why, and give an example?

2. Who do you think benefits from certain content?

Moderator: Together with the participants try to determine what is the agenda, purpose of this or that content mentioned by the participants.

3. How often do you use fact-checking (validity check) of information? And how, exactly?

4. How can you identify internet trolls, bots?

5. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: Is there any media source that you don't use at all for news and information? Which one and why?*

Shutdowns (20 minutes)

Objectives: Understand if/how participants bypass internet censorship attempts, specifically relating to the internet shutdown.

1. In January 2022, internet connection was practically unavailable in most of the country.
 - How did it affect you personally?
 - How were citizens of the country affected by the internet shutdown?
 - How did it affect civil society – activists, NGOs?

2. What internet services were missed the most, which were vital?

Moderator: provide assistance. For example, some people could not call an ambulance, get medication, could not travel around the city, could not access payment services, make bank transfers.

3. How did the shutdown affect your organizations or clients, what turned out to be critical at that point?

4. What did you do/are you doing to get access to blocked content on the internet?

5. Do you use or have you used VPNs, proxy servers and other methods to circumvent censorship, internet shutdowns?

Please, elaborate. What was your experience?

Were you able to access everything you wanted using VPN services?

Have they always worked or have there been failures?

6. Have you been contacted for advice on using the internet? What did you recommend them to do when the internet was shut down?
7. What blocking bypass methods have you personally used? Which ones turned out to be the most effective?

Moderator: additional questions: what have you heard about FireChat? How successfully was it used during the protests? Local networks, etc. (For reference: FireChat is an instant messaging client that works without an internet connection. Bluetooth and Wi-Fi wireless networks to send text messages and images).

8. According to our information, some services and programs to bypass shutdowns and internet blocks quickly and chaotically spread among people during the internet shutdown.

How did you check the reliability and safety of such programs? How worried were you about your data when installing such programs? If something happened to your data or the data of your clients or people you know, please elaborate.

9. In your opinion, what did the media, such as Orda (Gulnara Bazhkenova), use most often - what types of bypasses? What had the process been and how did they manage to do it?
10. *Moderator: Ask the question if there is time left for this section: Let's imagine that the internet is shut down again. What will you do, having experienced the January events?*

Digital rights (10 minutes)

1. Would you classify internet access as a right or a service, and why?
 - a. *Moderator: after discussion, for information: in Finland it is enshrined in the Constitution as a right, at a speed of at least 100 mb/s.*
2. Internet shutdowns happen in Kazakhstan at different times and in different regions.
 - What do you think about that? Is it legal?

- What rights are violated by internet shutdowns?
 - And when blocking certain sites?
3. What do you think about the legality and legitimacy of bypassing blocking?
 4. Security of personal data:
 - What is your attitude toward biometrics/digital control (face scanning, fingerprinting, etc.)?
 - Leakage of personal data from government agencies, banks, from websites (krisha.kz, kolesa.kz), medical and other organizations. What can you say about it? Have there been cases of leakage of [your] personal data?
 5. How ready are you to defend your digital rights, digital rights of organizations and citizens, in case of violation? Do you know how to defend your digital rights? (*the right of electronic signature, security of personal data, electronic voting rights, etc.*)

Conclusion (around 5 minutes)

Objective: To elicit open feedback to potentially raise points of importance for participants that were not addressed earlier in the discussion.

Today's discussion was designed to see how you use the internet, what are your sources for news and information, and whether the internet shutdown has affected you. We have discussed various issues with you. Perhaps there are other aspects or problems that we have not touched on but, in your opinion, they are important for our topic.

- Is there anything else that we all need to know to better understand the problems of internet usage in Kazakhstan?



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