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The Role of Independent and Alternative Media in Conducting Investigative Journalism

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Abstract. This article examines the role of independent and alternative media in conducting journalistic investigations, focusing on the coverage of the protests that occurred in Kazakhstan in January 2022. The study presents a comparative analysis of materials published on three online platforms: «Azattyq», «Vlast» and «Inbusiness». The research employs content analysis and case study methods to identify the specific features of coverage, as well as to determine the methods and approaches used by each of these sources. The analysis focuses on articles published on 5 and 6 January 2022, which address the protests and the authorities' response to them. The findings reveal that the «Azattyq» and «Vlast» websites actively engage in journalistic investigations, incorporating the viewpoints of protest participants, experts, and detailed accounts of the unfolding events. In contrast, the «Inbusiness» website predominantly focuses on the official government response, reporting on the measures taken to suppress the protests and restore order, while the materials lack in-depth analysis of the events and opinions from opposition experts. In conclusion, recommendations are provided for improving journalistic investigation practices, expanding the representation of independent viewpoints in materials, and enhancing the level of objectivity in the coverage of significant events.

Keywords: independent media, alternative media, journalistic investigations, protests, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

In the modern information society, the role of mass media goes beyond its traditional function of informing. Media becomes a crucial tool for public control and a powerful factor

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in shaping public opinion. One of the most significant forms of media activity is investigative journalism. This is closely linked to aspects such as the independence and alternative nature of information sources. This topic is particularly relevant in the context of political, economic, and social processes occurring in various countries, including Kazakhstan.

Investigative journalism is a vital tool for uncovering legal violations, corruption, abuse of power, and other issues that significantly affect society's functioning [1]. However, the successful implementation of such investigations is only possible in an environment of freedom of speech, journalist independence, and access to alternative sources of information. In countries with press restrictions and strong government control, independent and alternative media often become the only channels for obtaining truthful information. Even though the country has a media law, it does not provide full guarantees for freedom of speech. If it were a law that protected freedom of speech or ensured the right to access information, the situation would be different [2]. Therefore, an alternative solution to this issue could be the promotion of alternative media [3].

The analysis of specific examples from different countries, including Kazakhstan, is crucial for understanding the role of independent and alternative media in investigative journalism. Kazakhstan, with its developing media environment and unstable freedom of speech, presents an interesting case for study. In recent decades, both traditional and alternative media have gained influence in Kazakhstan, despite existing legal and political restrictions. What is particularly significant is how independent journalists and media outlets in Kazakhstan overcome these restrictions and conduct investigations, highlighting key issues such as corruption, human rights violations, and environmental threats.

The relevance of studying the role of independent and alternative media in investigative journalism is driven by global trends in press freedom and the specific realities of countries undergoing democratic transformation. In the context of information wars, fake news, and increasing censorship, the importance of honest and independent journalism becomes clear. In Kazakhstan, the press situation remains tense. The existence of independent media capable of conducting investigations is not only a theoretical concern, but also a practical issue for all citizens striving for a more open and just society.

This study aims to examine the role of independent and alternative media in investigative journalism in Kazakhstan. The research will explore the impact of media independence on the quality of investigations, as well as the challenges journalists face in times of political instability and social tension. Particular attention will be given to the methods employed by independent media in the context of limited access to information and the judicial system. The study will also explore the use of digital technologies to bypass censorship.

This topic holds both theoretical interest and practical importance for the development of journalism in countries with limited press freedom, such as Kazakhstan, and in the context of global challenges in the information space. The aim of the research is not only to identify the contribution of independent media to shaping public opinion, but also to assess their significance in the development of civil society and democratic processes in the country.

Literature review

Investigative journalism is a distinct form of journalistic work focused on in-depth and detailed exploration of socially significant issues, often with the aim of uncovering hidden, illegal, or morally questionable practices [4]. This type of journalism emphasises facts, evidence, and independence from external influences. At its core, investigative journalism seeks to expose the truth, often despite strong resistance from authorities, business interests, or other powerful groups [5].

Theoretically, investigative journalism can be viewed from several perspectives. Within the framework of classical journalism theory, investigations are seen as a way to fulfil the public duty of informing society about events that impact the common good and preventing abuses of power [5]. According to the concept of the «fourth estate», the media not only inform the public but also oversee the actions of the state and other power structures [6].

Another key aspect of investigative journalism theory is the concept of journalistic ethics. It demands that journalists adhere to standards of honesty, objectivity, and transparency. Ethical standards ensure that investigations are not only truthful but also fair, respect individuals' rights, and consider potential consequences for society [7].

The first studies on investigative journalism emerged in the 20th century, as independent journalism schools in the US and Europe began focusing on detailed and sometimes high-profile investigations. However, with the rise of the internet and digital technologies, a new type of media platform emerged – alternative media – which started using the internet's capabilities for investigative work.

Contemporary research in independent journalism largely focuses on the impact of such media on societal processes. Scholars examine how independent media, despite having fewer resources and limited access to official information sources, manage to conduct successful investigations and expose cases of corruption or other violations [8]. Notable studies explore the successes and challenges faced by independent journalists, as well as the influence of their investigations on political and legislative changes.

Research also addresses the threats and risks faced by journalists working under restrictions and censorship. Independent and alternative media are often pressured by authorities or large business entities, complicating their investigative work [9]. Scholars highlight how economic and political factors can either hinder or support the development of investigative journalism.

A key feature of investigative work in independent and alternative media is the need to consider not only professional but also ethical risks. These include protecting sources, publishing sensitive data, and adhering to legal standards. Ethical issues are crucial, as journalists in these media often operate under threat and uncertainty, requiring extra caution in handling materials and sources [10].

Independent and alternative media play a crucial role in the modern media system, especially in democratic societies. These media act as important agents of change, influencing public opinion, political processes, and even legislative initiatives. They differ from mainstream media in their focus on public engagement, social responsibility, and challenging dominant discourses

[11]. Their investigations uncover hidden issues, such as corruption, human rights violations, and crimes within the upper echelons of power. This is often beyond the reach of traditional media, which are controlled by the state or large corporations. These investigations have a significant impact on public opinion, particularly when they address matters of public interest. For example, high-profile investigations into corruption within the political elite or illegal activities of major corporations can lead to public protests, widespread discussions on social media, and, in some cases, political changes [12]. One such case is the exposure of the «Panama Papers» in Iceland, which led to the resignation of the Prime Minister [12].

Moreover, independent media play a crucial role in ensuring transparency and accountability of those in power. In democratic societies, the media are regarded as the «fourth estate», capable of overseeing the actions of government bodies and large corporations [13; 14]. Investigative journalism conducted by independent media helps maintain this oversight, especially when authorities attempt to conceal their actions or silence inconvenient truths. In countries with limited press freedom, independent media often become the only tool through which the public can learn the truth about ongoing processes. In such environments, they strengthen democratic institutions, as the information provided by investigations helps citizens make informed decisions and participate in political life.

However, despite the importance of independent and alternative media, their influence on society is not always unequivocally positive. In situations of political and economic repression, where authorities or large corporations exert pressure on these media, journalists may face threats, lawsuits, or even violence [15]. In some cases, despite their independence, media outlets may be subject to censorship, and their investigations blocked [16]. Thus, the influence of independent media on society is a two-way process. Their activities affect societal processes, but external factors, such as political and economic pressure, also significantly impact their work.

Despite these challenges, independent and alternative media continue to play a vital role in modern society. Their ability to uncover hidden truths and address critical issues that cannot be raised in traditional media makes them an integral part of democracy and an important tool for public oversight.

Materials and Methods

This study selects three key sources of information, representing different types of media. The websites *Azattyq* (The Kazakh editorial office of *Radio Free Europe*, operating in Kazakhstan) and *Vlast* (Private site, Founder: Vyacheslav Abramov) are chosen as alternative media for analysis, as they focus on independent and alternative coverage of political and social events. The website *Inbusiness*, owned by the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs Atameken, is selected as a comparative media source. It focuses on economic issues and often collaborates with government bodies and large businesses.

Articles published on the websites *Azattyq*, *Vlast*, and *Inbusiness* on 5-6 January 2022 were selected for analysis. These dates were chosen because they coincide with the period of mass protests in Kazakhstan, which attracted widespread public attention. The rallies became a

significant socio-political event, addressing issues such as economic instability, rising fuel prices, and the political and social demands of the protesters.

The study employs the following methods: content analysis, case study, and comparative analysis.

Content analysis is used to examine how frequently different media conduct investigative journalism and how actively they cover significant socio-political events, such as rallies and protests. This method will analyse the quantity and quality of materials dedicated to investigations, as well as the approaches used in presenting information. We will explore which topics are investigated on the selected platforms, how often terms related to investigations appear in the materials, and how the results of these investigations are presented.

The case study method is used in this research to analyse how journalists on the three selected websites cover the same topic related to investigative journalism, in the context of the rallies and protests in Kazakhstan that occurred in January 2022. This method allows for a focus on the key issues and questions raised in the articles, the themes journalists emphasised, and how different media interpret the events.

Comparative analysis is used to compare how different media cover the same event. This study will conduct a comparative analysis of materials published on the websites *Azattyq*, *Vlast* and *Inbusiness* to identify differences in their approaches to covering the rallies and protests. This method will help determine how different outlets interpret the same events based on their audience, political stance, and connections to power structures.

Results and discussions

This section presents the results of the content analysis of articles published on three websites during the rallies in Kazakhstan on 5 and 6 January 2022. We analysed how each site covered the protests, and the volume of materials dedicated to investigative journalism, reports, and news articles.

On the *Azattyq* website, 11 articles were published on 5 January, of which 3 were investigative journalism pieces (27.3%) and 8 were news articles (72.7%). All articles on 5 January covered the protests, accounting for 100% of the published material.

On the *Vlast* website, 22 articles were published on 5 January. Of these, 3 were investigative pieces (13.6%), 9 were news articles (40.9%), and 10 were reports (45.5%). 15 out of 22 articles (68.2%) covered the protests.

On the *Inbusiness* website, 40 articles were published on 5 January. One article was an investigative piece (2.5%), 3 were reports (7.5%), and 36 were news articles (90%). 28 out of 40 articles (70%) covered the protests.

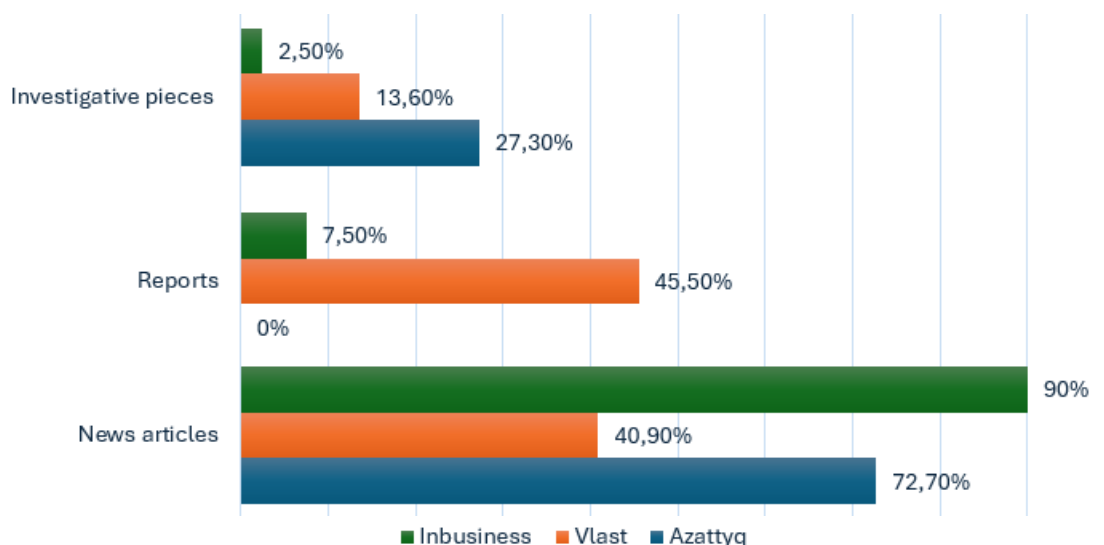


Figure 1. Comparison of content analysis results from three websites on coverage of protests in Kazakhstan (5 January)

On the *Azattyq* website, 10 articles were published on 6 January. Of these, 2 were investigative pieces (20%), 1 was a report (10%), and 8 were news articles (80%). All 10 articles covered the protests.

On the *Vlast* website, 5 articles were published on 6 January, all of which were news articles. Only 1 article (20%) covered the protests.

On the *Inbusiness* website, 15 articles were published on 6 January. These included 1 report (6.7%) and 14 news articles (93.3%). No investigative pieces were published, and 9 out of 15 articles (60%) covered the protests.

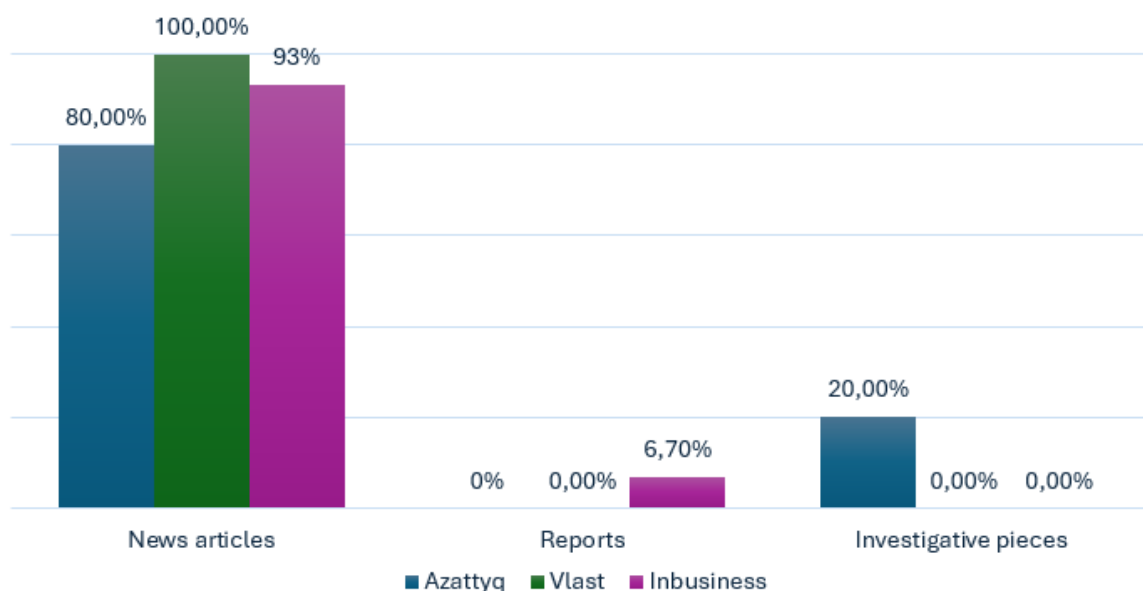


Figure 2. Comparison of content analysis results from three websites on coverage of protests in Kazakhstan (6 January)

The content analysis results show that both *Azattyq* and *Vlast* actively cover the protests. *Azattyq* publishes a significant amount of investigative material, accounting for 27.3% and 20% of the total articles over the two days. *Vlast* also publishes investigative pieces (13.6% on 5 January), but places a greater emphasis on reports (45.5% on 5 January). In contrast, *Inbusiness* primarily focuses on news articles (90% on 5 January and 93.3% on 6 January) and publishes very few investigative materials, reflecting its audience and ties to business circles. Overall, *Azattyq* demonstrates greater engagement in investigative journalism compared to *Vlast* and *Inbusiness*, which provide more superficial coverage.

This section also presents the results of a case study of articles published on 5 January 2022 across the three websites. The aim of the study was to identify the features of protest coverage in these sources, compare approaches to investigative journalism, and analyse the types of content presented on each site.

The *Azattyq* website published 3 articles related to investigative journalism, all focusing on the protests in Kazakhstan. These articles heavily relied on data from protest participants and expert opinions, adding depth and independence to the coverage. Let us take the following publications as an example: «In Almaty, individuals standing in the square were targeted with loud, flashing grenades. There are casualties and injured persons» (<https://www.azattyq.org/a/31642421.html>), «In Aktau and Zhanaozen, demonstrators are gathered in the square. The public is demanding the restoration of internet access» (<https://www.azattyq.org/a/31642193.html>). The site's journalists conducted their own investigation by visiting protest sites, interviewing local residents and participants. This approach provided first-hand information, offering a detailed analysis of the causes of the protests and the authorities' responses. The articles discuss the socio-political causes of the protests, the state of affairs in the country, and the reactions of various social and political groups. The pieces are presented as investigations that not only report facts but also analyse the cause-and-effect relationships behind the events.

The *Vlast* website also published 3 investigative articles, providing a detailed analysis of the protests in Kazakhstan. Similar to *Azattyq*, the journalists conducted independent investigations, interviewing protest participants and recording expert opinions. Example: «Fourth day of protest in Kazakhstan. Online» (<https://vlast.kz/novosti/48033-protestuusiie-v-almaty-perekryli-plosad-astana.html>). The articles present various perspectives on the events, including the views of opposition politicians and ordinary citizens at the protest sites. The journalists also describe clashes with the police, analyse the authorities' actions, and their response to the protests. Unlike *Azattyq*, this site places greater emphasis on the official reactions of the authorities and their representatives. The articles are more analytical, focusing on the political and economic consequences of the protests.

On the *Inbusiness* website, journalists presented an article that differs from the investigations on other sites. Rather than focusing on the socio-political situation and the opinions of protest participants, this resource examines the actions of the authorities in response to the protests, as well as official measures related to the situation in the country. For example, the article («The responsibility of the mass media will increase – Ministry») emphasises the actions of the President of Kazakhstan and other high-ranking officials, the measures taken to stabilise the

situation, and the legal aspects of the events (<https://inbusiness.kz/kz/last/bukaralyk-akparat-kuraldarynyn-zhauapkershiligi-artady-ministrlik>). The site does not focus much on the protest participants but provides information on how the government is responding, what actions were taken to suppress the protests, and the steps being taken to restore normalcy in the country. In this context, it is notable that the content on Inbusiness was more informational and official, lacking in-depth analysis of the causes of the protests or the views of independent experts.

Thus, the *Azattyq* and *Vlast* websites focused on in-depth investigative journalism, including interviews with event participants and experts, as well as visits to the scene. This approach allowed for a detailed picture of the events and presented various perspectives. It suggests that both sites aimed to offer objective coverage, rather than relying solely on official comments.

In contrast, the Inbusiness website focused on analysing the actions of the authorities and official measures, without conducting such detailed investigations involving experts or interviews with protest participants. As a result, while «In business» provided valuable information about the government's response, its coverage lacked the depth of analysis and diversity of perspectives found on the other sites.

Conclusion

Based on the content analysis and case study results, it can be concluded that the *Azattyq*, *Vlast*, and *Inbusiness* websites employ different approaches to covering the protests in Kazakhstan that took place in January 2022. Both *Azattyq* and *Vlast* actively use journalistic investigations, focusing on protest participants' opinions, expert assessments, and site visits. These sites provide a multifaceted picture of the events, allowing readers to see various perspectives and analyse the situation from different angles. In contrast, Inbusiness focused on presenting the official response from the authorities, paying less attention to the socio-political causes of the protests and independent expert opinions. This approach is typical of resources targeting a business audience, where the primary focus is on government measures.

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that independent and alternative media play a crucial role in covering significant socio-political events by providing diverse and independent viewpoints, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the situation. In contrast, state and official media, such as Inbusiness, may be limited to official statements and may not always offer a comprehensive picture of the events, potentially affecting the objectivity of the information presented.

It is recommended that independent media continue to develop investigative journalism practices by actively researching events on the ground and involving the opinions of participants and experts. This will contribute to more comprehensive and objective coverage of significant socio-political events. It is important that alternative media not only cover protests but also provide diverse perspectives, enabling the audience to receive more balanced information and gain a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of the events. State-run media should more actively incorporate independent viewpoints and conduct their own investigations to avoid excessive bias and improve the portrayal of situations, including perspectives different

from the official stance. Overall, all media should continue to employ established investigative journalism methods, such as on-site interviews and expert input, to enhance audience trust and ensure higher-quality, responsible reporting of key events.

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Ш. Атай

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Журналистік зерттеу жүргізудегі тәуелсіз және альтернативті БАҚ-тың рөлі

Аңдатпа. Мақалада 2022 жылдың қаңтар айында Қазақстанда орын алған наразылықтарды жариялауға басаназараудараотырып, журналистік зерттеу жүргізудегі тәуелсіз және альтернативті БАҚ-тың рөлі қарастырылды. Зерттеуде үш онлайн-платформада жарияланған материалдардың салыстырмалы талдауы ұсынылған: «Азаттық», «Власть» және «Inbusiness». Оқиғаларды жариялау ерекшеліктерін және аталған медиаларда қолданылатын әдіс-тәсілдерді анықтау үшін мазмұнды талдау және кейс-стади әдістері пайдаланылды. Талдау 2022 жылдың 5 және 6 қаңтарында жарияланған наразылықтар мен биліктің оларға реакциясы туралы мақалаларға бағытталған. Нәтижелер «Азаттық» және «Власть» сайттары наразылық қатысушыларының, сарапшылардың пікірлерін және орын алған оқиғалардың егжей-тегжейлі сипаттамаларын қоса алғанда, журналистік зерттеуді белсенді жүргізетінін көрсетті. Өз кезегінде, «Inbusiness» сайты тыныштыққа шақыру және тәртіпті қалпына келтіру үшін қабылданған шаралар туралы есеп бере отырып, үкіметтің ресми реакциясына назар аударады. Ал мақалаларда оқиғалар мен оппозициялық сарапшылардың пікірлеріне терең талдау жасалмаған. Қорытындылай келе, мақалада журналистік зерттеу тәжірибесін жақсарту, материалдардағы тәуелсіз пікірлерді, оқиғаларды жариялаудағы объективтілік деңгейін арттыру бойынша ұсыныстар берілді.

Түйін сөздер: тәуелсіз БАҚ, альтернативті БАҚ, журналистік зерттеу, наразылықтар, Қазақстан.

Ш. Атай

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Роль независимых и альтернативных СМИ в проведении журналистских расследований

Аннотация. Данная статья исследует роль независимых и альтернативных СМИ в проведении журналистских расследований на примере освещения митингов, произошедших в Казахстане в январе 2022 года. В фокусе работы – сравнительный анализ материалов, опубликованных на трех интернет-ресурсах: «Азаттык», «Власть» и «Inbusiness». Исследование использует методы контент-анализа и кейс-стади для выявления особенностей освещения событий, а также для определения методов и подходов, применяемых каждым из этих источников. В рамках исследования проанализированы статьи, опубликованные 5 и 6 января 2022 года, которые касаются протестных акций и реакции на них властей. Результаты показали, что сайты «Азаттык» и «Власть» активно проводят журналистские расследования, включая в свои статьи мнения участников протестов, экспертов и подробные описания происходящих событий. В свою очередь, сайт «Inbusiness» фокусируется в основном на официальной реакции правительства, сообщая о мерах, предпринятых для подавления митингов и восстановления порядка, при этом материалы не содержат глубокого анализа событий и мнений оппозиционных экспертов. В заключение

даются рекомендации по улучшению практики журналистских расследований, расширению независимых мнений в материалах и повышению уровня объективности в освещении значимых событий.

Ключевые слова: независимые СМИ, альтернативные СМИ, журналистские расследования, митинги, Казахстан.

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