



РЕКЛАМА И СВЯЗИ С ОБЩЕСТВЕННОСТЬЮ
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**How TV journalists perceive public relations:
The case of Kazakhstan**

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Abstract. How do Kazakhstani TV journalists perceive public relations (the profession and the PR specialists) in Kazakhstan? The problem was studied in Western European, North American, and South Asian contexts but not in the Central Asian reality. Globally, public relations (PR) suffer from a tainted reputation and is perceived with a heavy negative connotation. This perception often leads journalists to hold PR specialists in contempt and view the profession as serving particular private interests rather than the public good. This phenomenological research interviewed a purposive sample of 14 Kazakhstani TV journalists. Data saturation was reached at the eleventh interview. The findings illuminated the auxiliary status of PR compared to journalism, which enjoyed a higher status than PR. However, press officers enjoyed higher esteem compared to PR specialists. Press officers, often former journalists, were valued for their efficiency, literacy, honesty, openness, accessibility, and ease of communication. Being humane, non-arrogant, and open to professional relationships were also essential qualities. Many PR specialists in Kazakhstan were considered poorly qualified. The lack of journalistic experience among them hindered TV journalists from effectively working with them, as they often did not understand the rules and routines of media practice and how to adapt to media logic. Additionally, PR specialists focused on profit whereas press officers focused on the public interest.

Keywords: public relations, TV journalism, press officers, Kazakhstani journalists, public communication

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Как тележурналисты воспринимают связи с общественностью: казахстанский кейс

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Аннотация. Тема взаимоотношений журналистов и специалистов по связям с общественностью (PR) активно изучалась в контексте Западной Европы, Северной Америки и Южной Азии. Автор предлагает другой регион – Центральную Азию, а именно Казахстан. Связи с общественностью страдают от испорченной репутации и воспринимаются с негативным оттенком. Такое восприятие часто заставляет журналистов относиться к PR-специалистам с неуважением и считать, что эта профессия служит конкретным частным интересам, а не общественному благу. В ходе феноменологического исследования автором проведены интервью с 14 казахстанскими тележурналистками. Насыщенность данных была достигнута на одиннадцатом интервью. Результаты свидетельствуют о вспомогательном статусе PR по сравнению с журналистикой, которая имеет более высокий статус. При этом оказалось, что сотрудники пресс-служб пользуются большим уважением, чем PR-специалисты. Сотрудники пресс-служб, часто бывшие журналисты, ценятся за эффективность, грамотность, честность, открытость, доступность и легкость в общении. Также была отмечена важность таких качеств, как гуманность, отсутствие высокомерия и открытость к профессиональным отношениям. Многие специалисты по связям с общественностью в Казахстане считаются недостаточно квалифицированными. Отсутствие у них журналистского опыта препятствует эффективному сотрудничеству, поскольку они зачастую не понимают правил и распорядка работы СМИ, не могут адаптироваться к медийной логике. Кроме того, как показало исследование, считается, что специалисты по связям с общественностью ориентируются на прибыль, в то время как сотрудники пресс-служб – на общественные интересы.

Ключевые слова: связи с общественностью, телевизионная журналистика, пресс-службы, казахстанские тележурналисты, общественные коммуникации

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Introduction

Globally, public relations (PR) suffer from a tainted reputation as a “dark art” (Macnamara, 2014), characterized by “half-truths and obscuring of information” (Thummes, Seiffert-Brockmann, 2019), and perceived with a heavy negative connotation (Moloney, McGrath, 2020). This perception often leads journalists to hold PR specialists in contempt and view the profession as

serving particular private interests rather than the public good (Obermaier et al., 2015, p. 1032). Despite these negative perceptions, journalists and PR professionals share a professional bond, playing pivotal roles as societal guides in decision-making processes.

However, do these negative perceptions accurately apply to PR (both the profession and its specialists) in Kazakhstan? Existing research predominantly examines journalists' perceptions of PR in developed Western and Asian countries, leaving a significant gap in understanding within the contemporary socio-economic, political, and cultural context of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan. Therefore, exploring journalists' perceptions of PR as a profession and its practitioners in Kazakhstan presents a compelling opportunity. This study aimed to explore Kazakhstani TV journalists' perceptions of PR (the profession and its specialists) based on their experiences. While extensive research has focused on journalists' views of PR in Western and Asian contexts, understanding perceptions in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, remains underexplored.

Several factors contribute to this exploration. Firstly, Kazakhstan, like other former Soviet Union countries, continues to grapple with the legacy of the Communist Party, which heavily influenced media and communication spheres. During this era, public communication faced strict control, suppression, and ideological manipulation (Postoutenko, 2022). The media operated under a regime that crafted stylized, internally consistent public narratives serving state interests (Brooks, 2001, p. 247), with hierarchical and compartmentalized official communication structures.

In Kazakhstan, PR began to take shape with its public affairs function in 1990, coinciding with the establishment of PR departments in governmental institutions. Rooted in political origins, PR in Kazakhstan initially focused on fostering economic interests rather than public service, facilitating relationships between government entities and Kazakh society (Bekbolatuly, Karaulova, 2019). Secondly, the misunderstanding of the PR profession in Kazakhstan can be largely attributed to the Soviet-era system of public communication and the role of mass media. Wolfe argued that the mass media operated not as an independent entity but as part of the party's propaganda apparatus (Wolfe, 2005).

Kazakhstan boasts a robust mainstream media landscape, with more than 5000 registered media outlets as of 2022¹. The television sector, in particular, has grown significantly, comprising 165 officially registered Kazakh TV channels (24 national and 141 regional) and 247 foreign TV channels (Sakhariyanov, 2020).

Television coverage surpasses internet penetration, reaching 92.43 % of the population via digital terrestrial broadcasting in 2022², while internet penetration

¹ Over 5,000 media sources registered in Kazakhstan. "Kazinform" International News Agency. June 28, 2022. https://en.inform.kz/news/over-5-000-media-sources-registered-in-kazakhstan_a3949028/

² In Kazakhstan, 92.43 % of population covered by digital terrestrial television and radio broadcasting – Umarov. *Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan*. June 28, 2022. <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/kazakstan-halkynyn-9243-y-cifrllyk-efirlik-teleradio-habarlaryn-taratumen-kamtylgan-a-omarov-2852315>

stood at 90.9 % in 2023 (Kemp, 2023). Kazakhstani journalists heavily rely on press releases as a primary source of information, followed by websites and news conferences, underscoring their role as fact-checking resources (Turdubaeva, 2018, p. 7).

These dynamics occur against the backdrop of two main industry bodies: the Kazakhstan National Public Relations Association, established in 2001 to develop and strengthen the PR industry, and the Kazakh PR Specialists Club, formed in 2002 to elevate industry standards and the prestige of PR specialists.

Literature review

Government public relations vs business public relations

Public relations encompass managed communication activities aimed at building mutually beneficial relationships (Ströh, 2007). K. Moloney and C. McGrath argue that PR is an integral part of contemporary promotional culture, highlighting fundamental differences between public relations in corporate (for-profit) and public (not-for-profit) contexts (Moloney, McGrath, 2020). In for-profit organizations, PR is viewed as contributing to profitability by influencing reputation, which in turn impacts sales (Van Ruler, 2007, p. 124). Moreover, PR and marketing are increasingly integrating their efforts to deliver higher return on investment (ROI) (Elrod, Fortenberry, 2020). PR in the public sector differs significantly from its corporate counterpart. Local or national governments are viewed as obligated to provide public goods and facilitate citizens in fulfilling their democratic responsibilities (Canel, Sanders, 2013, p. 10). The public sector employed distinct communication practices compared to corporate communication management. C. Valentini identified four constraints that public information officers face daily: a complex and unstable environment, additional legal and formal restrictions, rigid procedures, and diverse objectives (Valentini, 2013, p. 97). It can be concluded that concerns such as sales or ROI are not primary in this domain.

Journalists' perception of public relations in individualistic cultures

Professional perceptions of journalists in developed individualistic (low-context) cultures in Western Europe, North American countries, and Australia often regard PR as synonymous with secrecy and publicity (Cronin, 2023), sponsored content (Ikonen et al., 2016), hidden agendas (Macnamara, 2014), and a social technology serving only corporate and private interests (Obermaier et al., 2015). PR practitioners are perceived as unethical, deceptive, client-serving, and controlling (DeLorme, Fedler, 2003). They are often seen as lacking an understanding of news values and journalistic work, and as gatekeepers who impede journalists' access to information sources within their organizations. However, some journalists have begun to recognize the value of PR specialists as professionals possessing beneficial skills and knowledge (Hanusch et al., 2019, p. 15).

This skepticism persists on social media. Journalists on Twitter continue to express their disbelief that PR specialists work toward mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders and the media. J.-W. Yoo and S. Jo found in their content analysis that “journalists largely understood PR to be about image-building and persuasion. In their tweets, they were likely to refer to publicity, image, persuasion campaigns, and marketing efforts geared to promoting an organization’s position” (Yoo, Jo, 2014, p. 1179). Another perspective on journalists’ intense opinions of PR specialists is professional envy. A. Tkalac Verčič, D. Lalič and D. Vujičić discovered that journalists believed PR specialists enjoyed better working conditions, higher salaries, and less stress (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2017). Additionally, journalists in the study held PR specialists in low professional esteem.

Journalists’ perception of public relations in collectivistic cultures

Contrary to individualistic cultures, journalists in Asian collectivistic developed and developing countries tend to have more positive perceptions of public relations. For example, South Korean journalists who frequently interact with PR specialists often hold more positive attitudes fostered by “cheong”, a naturally developed connection through common experiences. Consequently, Korean journalists are “less critical, more appreciative, and mellower toward public relations” (Yun, Yoon, 2011, p. 306).

In Japan, personal relationships between PR managers and journalists are crucial, based on the *kisha kurabu* (press club) system (Cooper-Chen, Tanaka, 2007). “For public relations professionals in Japan, one of the most important tasks is to build close relationships with media reporters” (Kitami, 2019, p. 120).

V. Loan, studying public relations in Vietnam, concludes that the local culture strongly influences personal relationships, encouraging journalists and PR specialists to support each other (Loan, 2014). Similarly, M. Filipov and A. Dybysova found that PR specialists and journalists in Mongolia shared warm relationships based on valuable news information and personal connections, with the latter often taking precedence (Filipov, Dybysova, 2022, p. 5217).

Informed by the literature review the researcher asked the following questions:

What perceptions do Kazakhstani TV journalists hold of public relations (the profession and the professionals) based on their experiences/interactions in the country?

What differences do Kazakhstani TV journalists point out between public communication professionals (PCPs) – press officers (working in the public sector), and PR specialists (working in the private sector) in Kazakhstan?

Methodology

This descriptive phenomenological research used semi-structured interviews for collecting data of lived experiences of Kazakhstani TV journalists with public communication professionals in Kazakhstan. Therefore, descriptive

phenomenology was considered as the most productive approach to “describe participant experiences, focusing on the ‘lifeworld’ of the individual” (Sinfield et al., 2022, p. 3). Semi-structured interview was the method to gather in-depth and detailed data (Morehouse, 2023). It allowed for deep conversational engagement, flexibility for interviewers, and uncovering (Wilson, 2014) Kazakhstani TV journalists’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs on that engaged in their experiences with Kazakhstani public communication professionals. This study employed purposive sampling of Kazakhstani TV journalists. The interviewees were selected based on the following criteria: (1) being a TV reporter, (2) having a minimum of five consecutive years in TV journalism, and (3) working at a TV channel in Kazakhstan.

Participants

14 female TV journalists participated in the interviews out of 38 who were approached. Among them, four were editors-in-chief with extensive prior TV reporter experience, seven worked as reporters, one was solely an anchor, and two worked as both reporters and anchors. The average work experience of the interviewees was 12.9 years. Eleven interviewees worked for private TV channels and three for public ones. Geographically, six informants were based in the capital, Nur-Sultan, five in Almaty, and three in Aktobe. Data saturation, defined by the method of G. Guest, A. Bunce and L. Johnson (Guest et al., 2006), was reached at the eleventh interview, as the subsequent three interviews yielded no new information. This level of data saturation aligns with the typical range observed in other studies, which generally include six to twelve interviews (Picariello et al., 2017). To ensure the anonymity of the interviewees, their job positions were uniformly categorized as TV journalists in Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Position	Work experience	TV channel	Type of media	Region
Interviewee 1	Female	TV journalist	19	KTK	private	Nur-Sultan
Interviewee 2	Female	TV journalist	18	Channel 1 Eurasia	private	Aktobe
Interviewee 3	Female	TV journalist	17	Rika TV	private	Aktobe
Interviewee 4	Female	TV journalist	15	Khabar TV	public	Almaty
Interviewee 5	Female	TV journalist	5	InformBuro31	private	Almaty
Interviewee 6	Female	TV journalist	7	Channel 7	private	Nur-Sultan
Interviewee 7	Female	TV journalist	6	Almaty TV	public	Almaty

Table 1, ending

Interviewee	Gender	Position	Work experience	TV channel	Type of media	Region
Interviewee 8	Female	TV journalist	6	Aktobe TV	public	Aktobe
Interviewee 9	Female	TV journalist	25	Hit TV	private	Almaty
Interviewee 10	Female	TV journalist	8	Almaty TV	private	Almaty
Interviewee 11	Female	TV journalist	20	KTK	private	Nur-Sultan
Interviewee 12	Female	TV journalist	7	Channel 7	private	Nur-Sultan
Interviewee 13	Female	TV journalist	10	KTK	private	Nur-Sultan
Interviewee 14	Female	TV journalist	18	KTK	private	Nur-Sultan

Source: compiled by the author.

Interview questions

The interview consisted of eight open-ended questions, each followed by a clarifying prompt. The questions focused on three main areas: (1) the importance of PR for society and the media’s daily work, (2) the level of professionalism and ethics of PR specialists in Kazakhstan, and (3) the challenges of working with governmental PR specialists (press officers) and PR specialists working for business organizations. The interview questions were piloted with two Kazakh editors-in-chief, each with three years of experience at the time of the study. One worked for a radio station, and the other for a magazine.

Results and discussion

Two themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews.

Theme 1: TV journalists’ perception of the public relations profession and its professionals in the Kazakh society

Most interviewees emphasized the critical importance of public relations in their daily work for verifying and clarifying information. Nearly 90 % believed that PR professionals served as a vital link between organizations and their stakeholders, providing TV journalists and the public access to essential information, expert opinions (talking heads), and senior management perspectives. One interviewee underscored the correlation between a media outlet’s reputation and the competence of public communication professionals (PCPs) – both PR specialists and press officers.

The majority of interviewees highlighted that the PR profession has established itself as a reliable source of timely and credible information, presented

in formats conducive to immediate consumption. According to Interviewee 9, “The quality of information and its delivery rests solely on the PR specialist”. PR also functioned as a crucial outlet during crises, acting as the authoritative voice for organizations in rapid exchanges with stakeholders. Two-thirds of interviewees attributed this capability to PCPs’ access to a wide array of specific information sources and their involvement in long-term strategic initiatives, whether socially or business-oriented.

From an economic and business standpoint, interviewees acknowledged the pivotal role of the PR profession, noting that “every product, organization, and industry exists because of public relations” (Interviewee 5). They also observed that top management behavior significantly influenced PR practices within Kazakhstani organizations, shaping organizational communication styles and tones.

Nevertheless, all interviewees indicated that their ease or difficulty in interacting with PCPs shaped their perceptions of both the PCP and the organization. Several interviewees stressed that PR professionals, particularly through their role in public communication, were expected to promptly address direct and tense interactions with audiences on social media. Failures to respond promptly or adequately could lead to negative repercussions for individual top managers or the organization.

A prevailing view among interviewees was that while journalism wielded significant influence, the impact of the PR profession on society was comparatively limited. This perceived power disparity underscored a clear framework where journalists occupied a leading position. Many interviewees also expressed concerns about the generally inadequate training and education among public communication professionals, including press officers and PR specialists.

Although interviewees acknowledged progress in the PR profession in Kazakhstan over the past five to seven years, they unanimously agreed on the need for further improvements in professionalism. Interviewee 14 encapsulated this sentiment: “There are those who do their job well and those who do it poorly”. Interestingly, most interviewees regarded press officers as more professional than PR specialists, noting disparities in commitment and performance across public and private sectors.

Efficiency, transparency, honesty, proficiency, and communication skills were identified as essential attributes that facilitated effective collaboration between PCPs and TV journalists, according to ten interviewees. They emphasized that PCPs in Kazakhstan played a crucial role in helping journalists navigate the complex landscape of governmental and business information and events. However, Interviewee 11 cautioned that such assistance was contingent upon PR specialists and press secretaries promptly and clearly providing information.

Unfortunately, interviewees unanimously lamented the scarcity of highly qualified public communication professionals in Kazakhstan. Interviewee 3 bluntly stated, “There is a critical shortage of real professionals in our country”, highlighting significant opportunities for growth and development within the PR industry. A notable challenge cited by interviewees was the inadequate knowledge

among PR specialists regarding media interactions, reflecting a limited understanding of journalists' work and the operational processes of TV channels.

Interviewees also pointed out several unprofessional practices prevalent among public communication professionals in Kazakhstan, including ghosting (ignoring), being impertinent, spinning situations positively, withholding information, and exhibiting a fear of making mistakes. Interviewee 4 succinctly advised, "PR people, don't lie to people and journalists", stressing the inevitability of concealed information surfacing in an information-driven society. Interviewee 1 echoed this sentiment, advocating for grammatical and factual accuracy in communication to project professionalism and expertise.

Half of the interviewees expressed optimism regarding the younger generation's potential to infuse social issues into PR practices and advance the sector beyond mere advertising, business, and product promotion. Ethical conduct was highlighted as a crucial aspect of professionalism in PR. While seven interviewees refrained from commenting directly on ethics, they emphasized the importance of honesty, transparency, accessibility, and a humane approach in interactions with journalists. Two interviewees viewed public communication professionals in Kazakhstan as generally ethical, linking ethical behavior to amicable relationships with journalists.

Conversely, five interviewees described PR specialists as unethical, citing practices such as disseminating false information, displaying arrogance, fabricating events, lying, and manipulating facts. They observed a frequent disconnect between the information provided and the actual reality of situations, with PR departments sometimes opting for silence during crises in hopes that issues would fade from media attention and public memory. Interviewee 12 reflected on this ethical spectrum, rating PR specialists' ethics at an average level.

In conclusion, interviewees unanimously agreed that personal characteristics significantly influenced the ethical conduct of public communication professionals and their relationships with TV journalists.

Theme 2: Work relationships between TV journalists, press officers, and PR specialists in Kazakhstan

Public communication professionals (PCPs) in Kazakhstan, specifically press officers and PR specialists were distinctly perceived by interviewees, with press officers often held in higher regard. They were viewed as reliable sources of information for TV journalists, especially those with prior journalistic experience who understood media operations and terminology. This familiarity facilitated smoother interactions compared to PR specialists lacking such backgrounds, who frequently needed detailed explanations and preparatory questions from journalists.

Press officers were recognized for their role in meeting journalists' informational needs by clarifying decisions, policy changes, and organizational activities. They were seen as pivotal in keeping society informed about governmental affairs, albeit with challenges such as bureaucratic communication

styles and occasional lapses in preparing experts effectively for media appearances. Issues like the dissemination of canned news during the COVID-19 pandemic underscored areas needing improvement, particularly in adapting communications to journalistic expectations and enhancing media relations across local governments.

Conversely, PR specialists were often viewed through a lens of profit-driven motives and superficial engagement, primarily focusing on enhancing corporate brands, social media metrics, and sales. Their perceived professionalism, compared unfavorably with press officers, was critiqued for lacking an in-depth understanding of journalistic processes and often necessitating extensive guidance from journalists. Despite understanding the importance of corporate image and reputation management, PR specialists faced skepticism regarding the newsworthiness of their communications, often categorized as paid advertisements rather than legitimate news.

Challenges persisted within the PR industry, notably a regional disparity in PR specialist qualifications and a tendency for PR efforts to align closely with marketing agendas, thereby limiting broader societal engagement. This operational divide contributed to a perception among journalists that PR specialists were less adept at navigating media environments and establishing meaningful journalistic collaborations compared to press officers.

In terms of cooperation frequency, TV journalists reported more frequent interactions with press officers, who proactively supplied information aligned with news cycles. In contrast, PR specialists were less proactive and often redirected journalists to marketing departments, citing concerns over news versus advertising distinctions. This discrepancy highlighted PR specialists' relative unfamiliarity with media relations and their reliance on structured, departmentalized approaches to media engagement.

The quality of relationships between TV journalists and PCPs hinged on the timely provision of factual information and the preparedness of spokespersons for media engagements. Positive relationships were noted when mutual understanding and shared professional goals were present, although conflicts occasionally arose due to perceived PR overprotectiveness or PR specialists' perceived neglect of journalistic needs. Overall, the perceived effectiveness of PR in enhancing organizational reputation and media interactions varied widely based on the professionalism and adaptability of individual PCPs, particularly their ability to align with journalistic norms and operational realities.

The survey results revealed that interviewees valued press officers over PR specialists. TV journalists seem to perceive press officers as communication facilitators who serve as mediators between public institutions and the media. This boundary-spanning role places the practitioner in collaborative relationships with both management (Broom, Dozier, 1986, p. 39) and TV journalists. This finding aligns with L'Etang's (2008, p. 109) description of public affairs practitioners who perform higher-status strategic work. The core strengths of press officers are their journalistic background and their work in organizations

serving the public good. Their journalistic experience helps them communicate effectively and beneficially with journalists, who value their public service role more highly than the corporate profit motives of PR specialists. This is consistent with Terry's finding that public relations in Kazakhstan is more about fostering economic interests than serving the public good (2005, p. 34).

The second contribution is the higher esteem in which interviewees held press officers compared to PR specialists. Press officers, often former journalists, were valued for their efficiency, literacy, honesty, openness, accessibility, and ease of communication. Being humane, non-arrogant, and open to professional relationships were also essential qualities. This result aligns with Pang's (2010) Media Mediating Model, which posits that public communication professionals must understand journalists' mindsets, routines, and newsroom practices.

Unfortunately, many PR specialists in Kazakhstan are not well-qualified. The lack of journalistic experience among PR specialists hinders TV journalists from effectively working with them, as they often do not understand the rules and routines of media practice and how to adapt to media logic (Tench, Yeomans, 2017, p. 29). This finding aligns with research on PR specialists in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, where public relations is a developing field with practitioners still gaining experience (Turdubaeva, 2018).

Despite the differing value placed on press officers and PR specialists, and their varying levels of professionalism, interviewed TV journalists regarded public relations as an auxiliary profession to journalism in Kazakhstan. Macnamara (2014) reached a similar conclusion, noting that journalists generally consider themselves superior to PR practitioners (p. 8). This perception is likely due to the long and well-established history of journalism in Kazakhstan, dating back to 1870 with the publication of *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* (1870-1917) in Central Asia (Sandugash, 2018).

Conclusion

Public Relations is an essential profession in Kazakhstan where TV journalists perceive PR specialists as communication technicians who write, edit, work with mainstream and social media, and hold non-managerial positions. Consequently, journalists rely on PR specialists for statistical data, spokespersons, or official information confirmations.

The study examined the perception of Kazakhstani TV journalists of public relations (professions and professionals) in the country. This study is the first in Kazakhstan, in which examines the views of TV journalists on public relations and public communications specialists. The research contributes to the study of TV journalists' ideas about PR as a profession and its practices, especially in the little-studied context of Kazakhstan.

It was found that the interviewed journalists value exactly press attaches more than public relations specialists. TV journalists perceive press attaches as intermediaries in communication between government agencies and the media

(the professional aspect). The identified factor is the higher respect with which respondents treat employees of press services in comparison with public relations specialists (the moral aspect).

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