SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Social Media Platforms (SMPs) have emerged as the new frontiers for academic engagement, more so during the pandemic. Cultural barriers, close censorship, and language restrictions may limit the participation of Central Asian scholars in the global scientific communication. This article explores the patterns of Social Media (SoMe) use in Central Asia and outlines probable deterrents of academic engagement in the region. Some suggestions are formulated to offer digital and socio-cultural solutions aimed to improve Central Asian scholars' activities on SoMe platforms and bridge the divide for fruitful academic partnerships.

Keywords: Social Media, Scholarly communication, Periodicals as Topic, COVID-19, Access to information

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INTRODUCTION

Social Media Platforms (SMPs) are new frontiers in academia [1]. With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, dissemination of science has entirely moved online [2]. Regulated use of Social Media (SoMe) in certain regions may still limit scholarly engagement. The increased presence of Central Asian scholars on various SMPs may enhance their participation in the global science communication, promote local publications, and enhance visibility of local authors and their institutions [3].

Gaining international footing is an important aspect of renewed confidence and may facilitate a steep growth curve after being exposed to diverse peer feedback. It

also facilitates networking and fostering mentor-mentee relationships for continuing professional development. While the advantages of SMPs for scholarly communication are manifold, language barriers, poor access to the Internet, regional restrictions, and close censorship may be impediments to successful engagement. Addressing some of these problems may lead scholars to foray into the unexplored world of SoMe for academia.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Since gaining independence in 1991, Central Asian republics have formed their own development strategies and plans for research cooperation. Currently, regulated access to information on SoMe is common in the region.

The largest regional Internet userbases are in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan [4]. The popularity of SMPs differs across Central Asian republics, partly due to the language preferences (Figure 1). Such a diversity limits the opportunity for cultural, social and academic exchange in a common space.

Kazakhstan

The introduction of 3G and 4G connectivity is responsible for the large number of the Internet users in Kazakhstan [5]. The frequently used SMPs are Vkontakte.ru, Urimtal, Blogbasta.kz, Odnoklassniki.ru, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (Figure 1). Of these, Blogbasta is perhaps the main channel of communication in Kazakhstan [5].

Kyrgyzstan

Recently, the Internet censorship has eased in Kyrgyzstan to enable public access to previously blocked websites [6]. The Internet laws in Russia indirectly affect Kyrgyzstan since their website servers are mostly located in Russia [7]. The use of foreign channels is prevalent, improving public access to the global pool of information [7]. Apart from Moimir, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, the use of Facebook and WhatsApp is also popular [8].

Tajikistan

Economic difficulties limit access to the Internet in this country, although the situation is slowly improving [9]. Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte, and Moimir are available for use, with sporadic inaccessibility to these SoMe being recorded [10].

Uzbekistan

The use of indigenous SoMe applications has been largely unsuccessful in Uzbekistan [11]. Of the thirty-eight local sites launched in 2016, only eight are still active (e.g., YouFace.uz, Muloqot.uz, and Davra.uz). Odnoklassniki, Vkontakte, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are also popular in Uzbekistan [12].

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan faces a ban on the most globally used SoMe like Facebook and WhatsApp. However, YouTube is commonly used [13]. BizBarde is an indigenous messaging application popular in Turkmenistan [14].

Recent collaborative initiatives of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have heralded the culture of cross-texting. For example, Facebook users can now read messages received on Instagram if the accounts are synced. Although the data ownership policies of several SMPs have been questioned, harmonising of

communication across platforms may be a potential solution for wider academic engagement. Data protection and violation of country-specific protocols can be a serious issue. Tackling misinformation also gains precedence during the pandemic.

Cross-texting may be a unique initiative with greater potential for advancing academic communication in the times ahead. Building towards a separate platform specifically for academic engagement of Central Asian scholars may be a potential solution to foster collaborations and scientific discussions.

ACADEMIC USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

English is the primary means of communication on the most reputable SoMe like Twitter. The youth in Central Asia shows great motivation to learn English through various avenues as it may open up greater opportunities to them [15]. Kazakhstan records the highest number of scholarly publications in the region mainly due to the Law of Science passed in 2011 and the prerequisite of all PhD candidates to publish at least one article in a non-zero impact journal [16, 17]. However, due to the lack of local indexed periodicals, Central Asian scholars are compelled to publish their articles in Russian and English 'predatory' journals which indiscriminately post poorly edited and unchecked contents on their platforms. Substandard English writing and editing skills and slow involvement in the peer review at indexed periodicals leave regional scholars at a scientific disadvantage [16].

The Kyrgyz youth actively use SoMe, but predominantly for socialising and entertaining [8]. Russian is the main language of communication in Tajikistan as the youth often migrate to Russia for job placements [18]. The use of Farsi and Turkic languages is also prevalent in the region [15, 16]. However, such a diversity in languages does not enable the engagement of local scholars in the global science communication on various reputable SoMe which are predominantly in English.

Importantly, many SMPs such as Facebook and Instagram now offer translation on the click of a button next to posts, allowing exchange across language barriers. On Twitter, some academic scholars in other non-Anglophone countries take to posting in their local languages. This initial step is exemplary to initiate the process of continuing professional development and international cooperation [21]. Twitter, which is the most widely used platform for the medical community (trends by the hashtag #MedTwitter), offers auto-translation. Such an option may pave the way for overcoming

language barriers and enhancing communication worldwide.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The current poor representation of Central Asian scholars in international scientific discussions could be improved by short-term measures such as overcoming cultural and political barriers to communication. The inclusion of English in the academic curriculum may bridge the language divide. Kazakhstan is fortunate in having a scholarship programme called “Bolashak” that encourages students to advance their English skills [15]. Such an initiative facilitates better representation of Kazakhstani students on an international arena.

Student mentorship programmes may widen networking of scholars on SMPs. Inclusion of SoMe training in the curriculum may be an effective way to spread awareness among the scholars about the benefits of the same. The awareness about the new lingo such as hashtags may improve the ability to access and process SoMe data. Just like Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms of the National Library of Medicine of the US, hashtags may improve the retrieval of relevant items on SMPs [22]. The use of hashtags may also enable access to various professional online groups that share texts, graphics, and research data [23].

Online research tools and platforms have gained a greater foothold in recent times. Online surveys, YouTube and Google trends-based studies are increasingly popular, and SoMe analytics and open-access datasets are instrumental for collaborative research to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic [23, 24]. SMPs are also a collaborative space to connect with peers and form alliances [23].

CONCLUSION

Scholarly use of SoMe in the Central Asia holds the potential to provide access to a large bank of useful scientific information. It paves the way for the exchange of information, perspective view formation, and a mutual gainful experience with the academic community overseas. Post-publication communication aids in strengthening ties of scientific communities in Central Asia and across the world [25]. Thus, extra efforts are

warranted to enhance the representation of Central Asian scholars on reputable SMPs. Overcoming technological, cultural, and language barriers would improve academic opportunities and provide a gainful experience for the whole region.

Figure 1. Popular social media platforms in Central Asia

Percentage figures depict internet penetration in the country

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

PG and LG were involved in data collection and ideation. PG prepared the first draft of the manuscript and LG reviewed the draft for critical inputs. Both authors agree with the submitted version of the manuscript, take responsibility for the content of the entire manuscript, and affirm that all queries related to any aspect of the same are appropriately managed.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest relevant to the manuscript.

DISCLAIMER

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ҒЫЛЫМИ БАЙЛАНЫС ҮШІН ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖЕЛІЛЕР

Түйіндемe

Әлеуметтік желі платформалары (ӘЖП) академиялық өзара әрекеттесудің жаңа платформасы ретінде пайда болды. Алайда, мәдени кедергілер, қатаң цензура және тілді нашар меңгерумен байланысты қиындықтар Орталық Азия ғалымдарының жаһандық ғылыми коммуникацияға белсенді қатысуына кедергі бола алады. Бұл мақалада Орталық Азиядағы әлеуметтік желіні пайдалану модельдері (ӘЖПМ) қарастырылып, аталған аймақтағы академиялық белсенділіктің ықтимал шектеулері сипатталған. Авторлар Орталық Азия ғалымдарының ӘЖП-дағы ғылыми қызметін жетілдіруге және жемісті академиялық серіктестік мақсатында қалыптасқан алшақтықты жоюға бағытталған цифрлық және әлеуметтік-мәдени шешімдер туралы ұсыныстар жасады..

Түйінді сөздер: Әлеуметтік желілер, Ғылыми байланыс, Мерзімді басылымдар, COVID-19, Ақпаратқа қол жетімділік

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СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ СЕТИ ДЛЯ НАУЧНОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Резюме

Платформы социальных сетей (ПСС) стали новыми площадками академического взаимодействия. Однако существующие культурные барьеры, жесткая цензура и препятствия в виде плохого владения иностранными языками могут стать препятствиями эффективного участия центральноазиатских ученых в глобальном научном общении. В статье исследуются модели использования социальных сетей (МИСС) в Центральной Азии, а также описываются факторы, сдерживающие академическую активность в данном регионе. Авторами сформулированы предложения цифровых и социокультурных решений, направленных на улучшение научной деятельности ученых из Центральной Азии на ПСС и преодоление существующего разрыва с целью плодотворного академического партнерства.

Ключевые слова: Социальные сети, Научное общение, Периодические издания, COVID-19, Доступ к информации

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