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Mass Media as an Instrument of Conflict Management in the Sphere of Consumer Rights Protection

Leila Mirzoyeva^{a*}, Oxana Syurmen^b, Karlygash Toganbayeva^c

* Corresponding author: Leila Mirzoyeva, leila.mirzoyeva@sdu.edu.kz

^aSuleyman Demirel University, Kazakhstan, leila.mirzoyeva@sdu.edu.kz

^bSuleyman Demirel University, Kazakhstan, oxana.syurmen@sdu.edu.kz

^cKazakh National University named after al-Farabi, Kazakhstan, toganbayeva@gmail.com

Abstract

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Consumer rights protection in Kazakhstan is insufficient nowadays due to many factors, one of which is the lack of systematic information support of consumers in the media. There are some researches in the field of media conducted by Kazakhstani scientists but they concern the state of the media and its problems in general and do not touch upon the problem of consumer rights protection or support in the media. Conflicts between consumers and businesses caused by consumer unawareness of their rights and absence of the information support through special Internet-platforms or online services have not been analyzed from the viewpoint of media space formation. This research examines the role of Kazakhstani media in the sphere of consumer rights protection in order to identify the necessity of designing the model of special competence in conflictology for journalists in the sphere of consumer rights protection. Training of specialists in this sphere will strengthen the impact of Kazakhstani media on prevention and solving the conflicts concerning consumer rights protection. The data have been collected through the analysis of available researches, media sources such as the Internet sites, television programs, newspapers and magazines containing the information concerning consumer rights protection and a questionnaire among students of two universities majoring in journalism. The results of the research prove the urgency of focusing on the training of media specialists in the sphere of conflict research with the accent on consumer rights protection.

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Keywords: Conflict management; consumer rights protection; media in Kazakhstan; journalist competence.



1. Introduction

It is well known that Kazakhstan is a developing country and as everywhere in the world consumerism develops together with its economy. However consumer rights protection is not consistent with increasing variety of goods and services, which can be explained by low awareness of Kazakhstani citizens about the issue. One of the reasons of low awareness or even unawareness is the fact that there used to be no question of consumer rights protection when Kazakhstan was a part of the Soviet Union, where all the goods and services were approximately of the same quality and everything was strictly controlled by the government. Taking into account that Kazakhstan started building its market economy only 24 years ago it is natural to assume that attitudes of the citizens to the issue have not changed greatly so far. It is also worth mentioning that the law about consumer rights protection in Kazakhstan was passed only in 2010, and consumer rights protection agency was established only in 2013.

The other reason of general low awareness about consumer rights in Kazakhstan is the lack of systematic information support of consumers in the media, which determines the necessity of the research and action in specialist training in this sphere. Moreover, the question of special training of would-be journalists for dealing with conflicts between consumers and businesses and information support of consumers was not addressed in any special research in Kazakhstan. Thus, the aim of the research is to identify the necessity of designing the model of special competence in conflictology for journalists in the sphere of consumer rights protection. To examine the influence of the media on prevention and resolution of conflicts in the sphere of consumer rights protection the analysis of all the Kazakhstani media sources has been undertaken and 200 students from two different universities situated in the same region but in different places (Almaty and Kaskelen) have been given a questionnaire to find out the level of would-be journalists' awareness of the issue and their opinion on the necessity of the special course. Data analysis has indicated the necessity of the model of special competence in conflictology for journalists in the sphere of consumer rights protection as there is not enough media content on consumer rights protection due to absence of specialists in the sphere. The data have been collected through the analysis of available researches, media sources such as the Internet sites, television programs, newspapers and magazines containing the information concerning consumer rights protection and questionnaire among students of two universities majoring in journalism. We hope the research will draw attention of the government and society to discussion of the problems of journalist professional training in accordance with the requirements of modern society.

2. Role of the Media in Consumer Rights Protection

In the age of rapid development of communication technologies role of information has acquired high importance in every sphere of life. The media as the main source of information nowadays has become inseparable part of any society and Kazakhstan is not an exception. In 2013 the government started the state program 'Informational Kazakhstan - 2020' (2013) one of the main aims of which is to develop national media and media space through making the broadband internet available to at least 75% of the population, transferring 100% of the media to digital form and spreading broadcast to 95%

of the population by 2020. According to the research of Khassan (2015), the amount of media supported by government in Kazakhstan has increased from 16% to 26% in the last three years, which shows the government's intention to have more influence on the media sphere. According to Nabirasool and Prabhakar (2014) the role of media, print or digital, is increasing together with importance of awareness in society. Raising awareness of Kazakhstani citizens is another priority of the program 'Informational Kazakhstan – 2020', which stipulates provision of the population with full, up-to-date and reliable information. At the same time a survey of public opinion suggests that the most perspective directions in the development of the society in Kazakhstan are: improvement of consumer rights protection – 41%, improvement of coordinated independent organization of society – 32,1%, strengthening of local authorities – 26,9%, broadening of information space – 12,8%, development of national and cultural centers – 7,6%, migration – 2,5% (4). It is obvious from the survey that not only the government is concerned about broadening of information space but also the population of the country is aware of the importance of information. However, the survey shows that the first concern of the citizens is improvement of the consumer rights protection, which is supported by the data of another survey of public opinion conducted by Sultanbayeva, in which the residents consider the following information represented in Kazakhstani media to be the most important: political – 26%, social – 19%, informative – 17%, information about sport – 16%, information about economy – 8%, entertainment – 3%, expert information – 3% (Sultanbayeva, 2012).

The fact that all the citizens regardless of their social status or income have consumer rights is accepted internationally nowadays. However, to have consumer rights does not mean the ability to exercise them. First of all one should know what the rights are and then where to apply to if the rights are violated. The importance of the media for consumer rights protection is obvious in this case. As television is currently the most significant media in Kazakhstan covering the most part of the population (about 95%), it is supposed to supply the residents with necessary social and expert information. Unfortunately, the only program aimed at informing the citizens about consumer rights and quality of goods and services 'Sapa Bakilauda' (Channel 'Eurasia') is in Kazakh and sometimes gives incorrect information (judging by some criticisms on the part of goods producers). It means that for Russian speaking population in Kazakhstan the information of that kind is not available on TV (There is information about TV program 'Pravo na kachestvo' ('Right for quality') that was going to be started in 2012 but at present time the program is not on the list of programs of the 1st Channel). There are definitely a number of programs for consumers on Russian TV channels broadcasted in Kazakhstan, but they present information about Russian products and services, which is irrelevant for Kazakhstani citizens.

Although popularity of printed newspapers and magazines is constantly decreasing they still have their audience and serve as information platform for government and private organizations and businesses. Nevertheless, the information on consumer rights and quality of goods and services is restricted to publication of laws and official documents. The Consumer League of Kazakhstan publishes the magazine 'Better Review', informing readers about the best goods and services, with circulation of 15000, which is obviously not enough to cover all the citizens of the Republic. It is worth

to notice that such practices as billboards and social commercials are not common in Kazakhstan as well.

Consumer rights in digital media

The importance of the Internet in Kazakhstan has grown dramatically in the last decade. As it was mentioned before, the government is planning to transfer 100% of the mass media to digital form by 2020. 'Kaztelradio', national TV and radio operator, has started the project 'Galam TV', which allows watching most Kazakhstani channels on the Internet. At the same time, there are some special Internet sites whose mission is to inform consumers about their rights and provide information support in case of the rights violation. The site of Consumers' Association of EAEU, for instance, the members of which are Kazakhstan, Russia, Belorussia, Armenia and Ukraine, does not represent the information about laws on consumer rights in the Republic of Kazakhstan and thus, is not well known and useful for Kazakhstani consumers (www.potrebitel.net).

The Consumer League of Kazakhstan and Consumer rights protection association 'Adal' are two main organizations dealing with consumer rights protection in Kazakhstan. Due to poor representation of the information on the activity of these organizations in the mass media most Kazakhstani citizens are unaware of their existence. Moreover, the Internet site of 'Adal' association requires registration making it more difficult and time consuming for an ordinary Internet user to consult the site compared to Russian, American or British sites with the same functions. The site 'Rospotrebnadzor', for example, has well-defined structure and does not suppose registration. Furthermore, some digital media, such as the 'Gazeta Ru' and the 'Moskovskiy Komsomolets' regularly give information about the activity of the organization (more than 900000 entries). The site of the American organization for protection of consumer rights (www.lectlaw.com) (about 29000 results) has the information about activities of the organization as well as examples of the documents useful for consumers. Unfortunately the situation for Kazakhstani sites is different. There is no structured information about activities of the organizations and representation in the mass media is poor: 55000 entries with information about 'Adal' (some interviews for Voxpopuli.kz and 31 Channel) and only 8700 entries for non-profitable organization 'Kazpotrebnadzor', which also deals with the issues of consumer rights protection.

Taking into consideration the fact that rural citizens do not always have the Internet access they are unaware of the information on these sites. Moreover, Kazakhstani citizens would like the media to change the way they present information. According to the results of the wide scaled joint research «Kazakhstan Mass Media: Key Participants, Possibilities, Needs and Risks», done by the International Centre of Journalism Media Net (2009) and fund Soros, Kazakhstani media as well as the media in Central Asia are thought to have mainly informative function. Journalists hardly ever act as analytics or experts being able to anticipate the course of events. Most participants of the survey mentioned that the media could have more influence in Kazakhstan than they have now. Journalists can help citizens solve petty problems, but they prefer to stay out of politics, although local authorities reckon journalists and their publications. Most respondents argued that the media only state the facts without analysis and expert opinions on the ways of problems' solution. Nabirasool states "...consumer education means the right to acquire the knowledge and skill to be an informed consumer throughout life. Ignorance of

consumers, particularly of rural consumers, is mainly responsible for their exploitation.” (Nabirasool & Prabhakar, 2014, p. 3) Consumers should know their rights and exercise them, which will help achieve really successful consumer rights protection. “Thus, the concern of consumer protection is to ensure fair trade practices, quality of goods and efficient services through informing the consumer with regard to quality, quantity, potency, composition and price for their choice of purchase” (Nabirasool & Prabhakar, 2014, p 5). For this purpose would-be journalists should be able to handle different problems, write special articles and blogs, and create social advertisements and TV programs to help consumers protect their rights.

3. Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted in 2015-2016 in Kazakhstan at Kazakh National University named after al-Farabi (Almaty) and Suleyman Demirel University (Kaskelen) with 200 students majoring in journalism. There were no special criteria for the selection of the participants like age and GPA of the students or their belonging to a particular ethnic group, the only criterion was to major in journalism. The average age of the participants was 20. The participants were informed about the purposes and methods of the research. The questionnaire aimed to raise future journalists’ reflections on the necessity and efficiency of their competencies in the field of consumer rights protection and conflict management.

Limitations

Though there are a number of resources and studies on consumer rights protection in other countries, few of the authors have mentioned or done really thorough research concerning the state of the problem in Kazakhstan, which shows the necessity of further research in this field. Due to the limitation of time (it took only one academic year), peculiarities of the subject, and the lack of academic research in the field of investigation, this study has only limited itself to the main issues as mentioned above. As a result, the research has not addressed all the aspects of future journalists training; also, it did not mention all aspects of consumer rights protection. The sample of students represented only two universities of one region, but as Almaty is the biggest city in Kazakhstan and an information center at the same time students’ awareness of the problem still can be representative. Furthermore, journalist-training programs are approximately the same at all the universities in Kazakhstan and standards are established by national universities (132 students are the students of Kazakh National University). We accept that a further wider scale research should be done in other regions of Kazakhstan. Some limitations are also related to the age of our recipients, so we are not aware of the different audience opinion.

Measurement tools

A questionnaire was employed in order to investigate the future journalists’ reflections on consumer rights protection issues. The questionnaire form comprises five questions; one of them is measured on a

scale of importance (Important or Not Important, where 1 = Very important, 2 = Important, 3 = Of little importance, 4 = Not important), whereas other four are Yes/No questions. The questions aimed at finding out future journalists' level of awareness of the problems in the field of consumer rights protection (*Do you know which organization to consult in case you have a problem as a consumer? Have you ever met the information about violating consumer rights in local newspapers? Have you ever met the information about violating consumer rights on the Internet, on Kazakhstani sites, in particular?*). On the other hand, it was necessary to clarify if students realized the role of the mass-media in solution of consumer problems (*Have you ever discussed problems of conflict management in the field of consumer rights at any courses you have studied?*), and the importance of conflict management in the aforementioned sphere by means of the media (*In your opinion, how important is it to be able to manage the conflict in the field of consumer rights protection as a journalist?*)

Research process

Qualitative research method was chosen for analysis of students' reflections. The research was conducted in the context of such courses as The Internet and New Media, Genres and Functions in Contemporary Journalism, Media Legislation and Ethics. It should be pointed out that all these disciplines are included in the State Educational Standard as mandatory components of would-be journalists' training. The research process lasted for one academic year; as a result, it provided general information of students' opinion concerning role of mass media in consumer rights protection and conflict management.

Results

In the course of the survey results analysis we should take into consideration such factors as (1) the age of the participants (16-20 and 20-30 age groups); (2) their personal (non-professional) negative experience as consumers; (3) their attitude to journalists' intervention to the process of consumer rights protection: (3a) relevancy of the appropriate competences; (3b) representation of facts and situations related to the aforementioned field, in printed/digital media; (3c) representation of those problems in curriculum.

Most participants (76%) were in their early 20's. Answering the 1st question about awareness concerning the organization dealing with consumer problems, most of the respondents (68%) chose negative answer; they had no idea where to apply in the case of their consumer rights' violation. This fact proves the necessity of special training for journalists, whose main purpose is developing media literacy. Questions 2 and 3 were related to the source of information concerning violated consumer rights (See Fig.1 and Fig. 2).

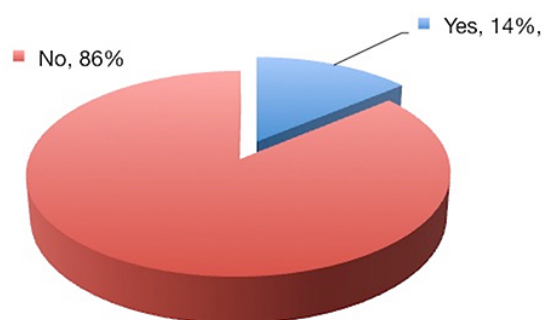


Fig 1. Representation of the information concerning consumer rights in local newspapers

Have you ever met the information about breaking consumer rights in local newspapers?

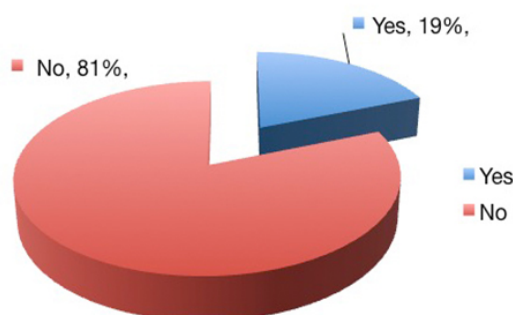


Fig 2. Representation of the information concerning consumer rights on the Internet

Have you ever met the information about breaking consumer rights on the Internet, on Kazakhstani sites, in particular?

It is not surprising that the target audience considered the Internet as a preferable contact point (19% of respondents pointed out that they have met the information about violating consumer rights in the Internet, whereas 14% of the respondents found such facts in local newspapers). However, both figures are insignificant. In our opinion, it purported both lack of information about consumer rights violation / protection and lack of journalist interest to one of the crucial social issues. As it has been stated above, the Consumer League of Kazakhstan has its own site, but, unfortunately, media do not demonstrate lively interest to that segment of information. It is probably presupposed by incorrect structuring of the information on the site, which results in not reaching the target audience.

Question 4 (Have you ever discussed problems of conflict management in the field of consumer rights protection at any courses you have studied?) was considered as the point of influence because it clarified the situation with special training for journalists in the field of consumer rights protection and conflict management. Answering the question would-be journalists highlighted the importance of special professional training in the field. At the same time, most of the respondents marked the lack of information concerning violation of consumer rights (89% of the respondents stated that there was no

special topics or case studies dealing with the issue). Only 11% of 200 students involved in the research claimed they acquired awareness of consumer problems via university courses.

By means of question 5 we made an attempt to estimate how important it was for the respondents to be able to manage the conflict in the field of consumer rights as a journalist. The results showed that 46% of the respondents consider the ability to manage the conflict as very important, or important (32%), whereas 17% of the respondents considered such kind of information to be “of little importance” for journalistic work, and, finally, 5 % of the respondents did not realize the necessity of journalists’ work in the field.

Summing up the results of the survey, it is necessary to underline that most of the respondents perceive the significance of journalists’ work in the field of consumer rights protection as well as management of conflicts in this sphere despite the lack of information and unavailability of special courses related to this field. So, we can conclude that would-be journalists are motivated for future work in the field of consumer rights protection.

4. Conclusion and discussion

The present study is focused on investigating the reflections of would-be journalists on the functions of the media in the field of consumer rights protection. The results demonstrate that future journalists have positive attitudes towards their prospective work in this sphere. It was also found out that most of the participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss the situation in the aforementioned field.

According to the wider survey conducted by Soros Kazakhstan and the International Centre of Journalism Media Net most journalists are interested in enhancement of legal knowledge concerning regulations of mass media activity, ways and methods of rights protection, work of courts and other legal issues. Specialists in the sphere of media also noticed the necessity of particular focus of universities and media companies on such directions as business and legal journalism. Despite the fact that there are lots of programs concerning these spheres of journalism, many editorial offices still consider special training of the staff in legal sphere necessary.

Media literacy is one of the informational policy priorities in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Prevention of conflicts in the sphere of consumer rights protection and media literacy can become effective tools in decreasing tension in the society. These factors presuppose social importance both of the survey and the prospective work. In our opinion, the lack of journalists’ work for prevention of conflicts between businesses and consumers, the lack of Kazakhstani citizens’ awareness of the consumer rights and the lack of information about work of special organizations in the mass media should be given special attention. First of all, it is necessary to elaborate the strategy of journalist training improvement. Secondly, would-be and working journalists should be able to use different methods such as social advertisements, shows, blogs etc. in order to make the consumers aware of their rights and organizations protecting consumer rights in Kazakhstan.

We hope that our research will make a specific contribution to the media space of the Republic of Kazakhstan and will prompt the implementation of new strategies in journalists training. Special materials on journalist training in the sphere of consumer rights and improvement of linguistic competences such as verbal reasoning are being developed. Expected social effect is based on

introduction of new methodologies into educational process of media specialists training; working out the strategies of social help; formation of special segment in the media space with the aim of improving media literacy of the population in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

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