*April 8, 2015*

**Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan**

**Media Program: Portfolio Review**

**Focus/Project: “iMedia Project”**

Dariya Tsyrenzhapova, coordinator of the Media Program, presented the iMedia Project.

Launched in November of 2014, it is Kazakhstan’s first boot-camp for multimedia journalists. The fellowship program is run by the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (SFK) and its grantee – the Kazakhstan Press Club – in partnership with the Missouri School of Journalism and the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia.

By the amount of course work, which totals to more than 200 in-class hours, the iMedia Project sets a precedent by being Kazakhstan’s first long-term professional training program for early- and mid-career journalists. The program is designed to provide the participants vision, knowledge and skills, enabling them to launch independent media start-ups that would refrain from receiving government procurement for covering news. [[1]](#footnote-1) The journalism curriculum at local universities is outdated and continues to instill government ideology without reinforcing critical thinking and professional standards for journalistic integrity.

The iMedia Project applies a technology-driven approach to promote media and information literacy among journalists by shaping their multimedia and entrepreneurial mindsets. It equips reporters and media managers with a new set of skills allowing them to experiment with new digital platforms and sustainable business models successfully applied across the field, both locally and internationally.

The 19 iMedia Project fellows, selected in 2014 from a pool of 86 applicants, include reporters, editors and media entrepreneurs with at least five years of professional experience that ranges from working for small-town media outlets to national news media organizations.

This September, upon the completion of all five week-long sessions, such as Multimedia I; Business Strategies and Media Management; Multimedia II; News Design and Data Visualization; Investigative Reporting, our participants are expected to pitch business ideas for their start-ups.

**Suggestions of the participating colleagues were the following:**

* It would be beneficial to design follow-up activities for the iMedia fellows once they complete the training program. One of the suggestions was to facilitate a peer-meeting for graduating and incoming iMedia fellows.
* As a learning experiment one suggested to put in the classroom for the second time an old participant with a group of new incoming iMedia fellows. That way, a participant from the previous year will have an opportunity to revisit the course material and share his/her knowledge with the group.
* Invite the successful iMedia fellows to speak at the annual youth conference “ZhasCamp,” supported by the SFK Youth Program.
* Seek additional funding sources for covering travel expenses of the participants from various regions of Kazakhstan. As a side option, the SFK should consider covering travel expenses only partially: either a round-trip airfare / train tickets or the cost of accommodation in Almaty for the duration of five training modules.

**Why launch a fellowship program for journalists?**

The iMedia Project does not aim to substitute the primary role of the university system in upbringing a new generation of journalists. Its goal is to propel the launch of new media start-ups in a civic space that is being closed by legal and economic constraints.

Aside from providing hands-on advanced training for journalists, the iMedia Project has been successful in raising the professional capacity of local instructors by integrating them in the classroom with professors from the Missouri School of Journalism and the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. This June, as we start launching the second year of the iMedia Project, we will recruit five additional local instructors in order to increase their presence in the program for up to 10 people by the end of the year.

**Questions and summary of responses:**

* What are the expectations? Are the participants required to complete any projects? *Our participants create online projects in the classroom as they learn and build their multimedia skills. Their successful work gets published by their newsrooms. Upon the completion of the five training modules, each of the participants is eligible to compete for a production grant from the SFK that will help the team start a new media project or run a quality redesign of their existing online operations.*
* Can freelance journalists apply for the iMedia Project? *Yes. We currently do have one participant who is a freelance journalist. During the first year of doing the iMedia Project, we’ve been continuously seeing how quickly our journalists have been changing their jobs and receiving promotions. Some – not being able to fit into the old environment – have been taking a venture of starting their independent projects.*
* Are there any universities, both public and private, that offer journalism as a major? *Yes*, *besides the Kazakh National University, there are several private universities like KIMEP and the UIB that offer journalism on an undergraduate and graduate levels. These programs though lack hands-on training and continue to utilize outdated curriculum models.*
* Which open society values does the iMedia Project promote? *Freedom to seek information and report, journalism ethics and professional integrity, critical thinking through the application of digital technologies.*

During its pilot year, the iMedia Project has been successful not only in providing advanced training for early- and mid-career journalists, but also helped to counter journalists’ preconceived perceptions about SFK’s work.

1. In 2013, with the national advertising market revenue at $265 million, the government procurement disproportionately distributed among nearly 100 leading media outlets amounted to $233 million. Struggling to generate other revenue streams, the media fall into the trap of covering social and political news through the lens of state propaganda. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)