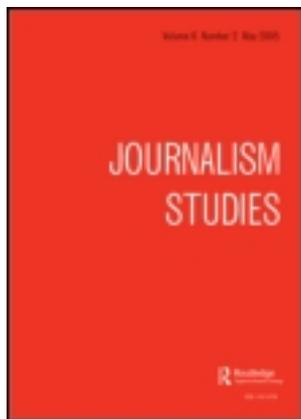


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### Obstacles to the Professionalization of Mass Media in Post-Soviet Central Asia: a case study of Uzbekistan

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# Obstacles to the Professionalization of Mass Media in Post-Soviet Central Asia: a case study of Uzbekistan

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**ABSTRACT** *Uzbekistan is the most populous and economically significant of the five Central Asian republics of the former USSR. Although authoritarian, its government appears to recognize the need to train journalists in Western journalistic theory and practice. The observations and experiences of the authors, as recent Fulbright-sponsored journalism scholars in Central Asia, are combined with limited sources on mass media in the region, to discuss the most effective journalism education under current conditions in Central Asia.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Uzbekistan, Journalism Education, Censorship, Central Asia, Self-Sensorship, Independent Media*

## Introduction

A free and independent press has yet to emerge in Uzbekistan, the most populous and economically significant nation in former Soviet Central Asia. More than a decade after the end of the Soviet Union, major obstacles still prevent Uzbek journalists from becoming effective agents of positive social change and development. In addition, the Soviet-shaped style of journalism education remains prevalent, making it tougher to train would-be journalists in international standards of reporting, editing and application of relevant news values. The forces of authoritarian press control and out-of-date training converge to slow the move to a freer, more professional press.

Still there are signs of improvement. In May 2002, President Islam Karimov removed his chief censor after international monitoring agencies condemned Uzbekistan's tough media controls and abuse of journalists. It remains, of course, difficult for journalists to tell how far they can now go. The Uzbek government generates mixed messages, and journalists are left to test its tolerance, a risky business, given the

country's history of imprisonment and torture of journalists. Karimov says he wants to further reform the press by dismantling the Uzbek State Press Committee, the censorship arm of the government, replacing it with a more tolerant apparatus. In a 3 July decree, he said the new agency should monitor the implementation of legislation to ensure freedom of speech and of the press.

The new agency is also charged with hazy obligations such as monitoring and licensing publishing houses and with controlling the advertising industry. Even with the apparent easing on the press, journalists will likely be gun shy about becoming watchdogs on government. Under these conditions it is also difficult for budding journalists to know how to prepare for the profession. More research on existing media is likely to help.

For this study, we use the limited research sources and literature focusing on journalism in independent Uzbekistan, plus our own observations and experiences as Fulbright-sponsored visiting scholars in Uzbekistan from 2000 to 2002. Available Soviet studies are more than a decade old and have little relevance to condi-

tions under the current government, except for comparative purposes.

Our charge by the Fulbright program was generally to promote democratic newsgathering and reporting techniques among Uzbek journalists and journalism students. Our collective Fulbright experiences allowed us to informally interview and collect information from a variety of media professionals. In addition to our own observations, we relied on a variety of excellent websites to inform the research. These included those of the *Times of Central Asia*, Amnesty International, Eurasianet, Internews-Uzbekistan, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting and Transitions Online, as well as reports by the Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch and the US State Department. As visiting fellows, we taught courses primarily for the Faculty of International Journalism of Uzbek State World Languages University and led journalism workshops and seminars for media professionals, high school students and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives in cities across Uzbekistan, as well as in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. One author also served as a consultant to Internews-Uzbekistan, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other news and information agencies in Central Asia during his fellowship.

Our critical analysis of the Uzbek press system is heavily influenced by Western ideology regarding press freedom and journalistic independence. Similar values are nominally endorsed by the Constitution of Uzbekistan—although in reality they can't be exercised. Officially, the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Article 4, upholds press freedom, stating, "Censorship of the mass media is inadmissible in the Republic of Uzbekistan." Under the former regime, newspapers could not be printed without official approval and were required to be printed by state-owned printing houses, which required certification from the censoring agency. The most recent signs of easing of press restrictions are limited coverage of previously banned topics such as prostitution and AIDS in Uzbekistan. There is also some coverage critical of minor officials.

The Constitution includes provisions for free-

dom of thought, speech and convictions, but in reality they remain highly constrained. Statutes, however, are contradictory and conflicting. The US State Department reported that the 1998 mass media law formally provides for freedom of expression, protects the rights of journalists, and reiterates the constitutional ban on censorship. However, several articles of that law, and the lack of due process provided for the implementation, allow the government to silence critics (US Department of State, 2001).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2001), is scathing in its report the Uzbekistan government's record of press censorship:

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Control of the media, including the Internet, is pervasive in Uzbekistan: The government monopolizes printing presses and newspaper distribution, finances the main newspapers, and has the power to grant or deny licenses to media outlets. Uzbekistan is also one of the few countries in the world that practices prior censorship. The State Press Committee can order any material to be withdrawn, and it is not unusual for newspaper editors or radio producers to receive phone calls from officials demanding revisions.

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As an illustration, the publisher of the independent weekly paper *Samarkand* published a story titled "Who loves his motherland more—the one who praises it, or the one who criticizes it?" He left blank spaces in the text of the front-page article to show where censors had ordered elimination of the paper's demand to abolish censorship in the country (Eurasianet.org, 2001).

Elimination of prior restraints shifted responsibility for critical stories from the censoring agency to chief editors, and some journalists have been reprimanded for articles that have been published since then. In June 2002, only weeks after the agency was eliminated, a CPJ delegation met with journalists, human rights activists, diplomats and government officials in Samarkand and Tashkent and observed that "local newspaper editors have been warned that they will be held personally accountable for what they publish, limiting the impact of this step".

Uzbekistan's low per capita income (www.worldbank.org) also impedes develop-

ment and maintenance of an independent press. As Stroehlein (2002) puts it, "The country's poverty insures that alternative media outlets cannot develop; forget Internet access: less than one percent of the population can even afford a daily newspaper." Ironically, those who can afford cable television can watch MTV and American sit-coms and dramatic series (Hilliard and Keith, 1996). Also available are the BBC World Service, CNN, and German, South Korean, Russian and other outside media.

### Western Values Confront Central Asian Realities

A common view among older journalism academics in Tashkent is that Uzbekistan follows something called "Eastern Democracy". This suggests that Western news values and independence of the mass media are not appropriate for Uzbekistan, where there is a strong and enduring respect for authority. It also fits with the general ideology promoted by President Karimov's government. This ideology seems to assert that democracy is intertwined with the general national goals of modernization and development, but that individual liberties and press freedom shouldn't extend beyond what is required to achieve an advanced level of economic development and national security.

In 2002, national security for Uzbekistan was connected to favorable relations with the United States, Britain and other Western powers that can offer protection from insurgent movements from the south, as well as from the re-emergence of Russian colonialism. Our own posting to Uzbekistan to teach "democratic journalism" was probably related in a minor way to complex factors of foreign relations, historical circumstances, and positioning in the world economy. We tried to keep these factors in mind to help our Uzbek journalism students become more effective, critical consumers and producers of domestic and international mass media. For the most part, they were up to the challenge.

Since there are few individual liberties and little indication of political dissent, it is difficult to determine the will of the Uzbek people in

regard to Western democracy and individual liberty. Perhaps they would be satisfied with a benign authoritarian regime, which is at least engaging in nation building after years of Russian domination, and one that provides security in a volatile region, while striving for economic development in a challenging world economic system. Of course, as Americans, we adhered to the basic assumption that all people yearn for the individual liberties that are fundamental to our belief system. This belief system includes open access to information through a relatively unfettered press system. Such assumptions colored all of our experiences as Fulbright scholars, and color the observations and commentary of this article.

There is debate, in the West and elsewhere, about the universal validity of what the University of Missouri's John C. Merrill (2002) calls the "basic premise that Western-style libertarian press theory is what the rest of the world should accept". In *The Mission: journalism, ethics and the world*, he wrote that the insistence that the media everywhere conform to Western "capitalistic and pluralistic" media structures is "of course not only an arrogant and ethnocentric one but also betrays a stultified, intellectual view of reality. Cultures are different. The values that shore up such cultures are different. Stages of national development are different. Citizen expectations are different."

Despite those assertions, we would argue that the conventions of international journalism are essentially the same and are primarily based on the British and American models. Although officials and others in power in nations like Uzbekistan make every attempt to control internal information flow, they also recognize a need to support the development of expertise in external information flow. If they fail to do so, their government will appear too crudely authoritarian or unsophisticated with regard to the news and information they convey to the rest of the world. The threat of sanctions against Uzbekistan for continuing its deliberate and pervasive press censorship policies may be too daunting. Its government can not disregard the negative impact of its abysmal human rights record on the probability of securing foreign aid, development loans and

favorable national security agreements. Thus, it is likely to try harder to mollify media watchdogs and human rights monitors.

Possibly for these reasons, we found a general tolerance among World Languages University administrators and instructors for our view of journalism curriculum content. We had no open constraints on academic freedom, and our students actively discussed issues and ideas that would not be allowed in print or on radio or television. Perhaps sadly, many students said they plan to work abroad and want to develop Western media skills, not to apply them in Uzbekistan but to allow them to work in Europe, Japan or the United States.

The 2000 Fulbright description for Uzbekistan called for teaching “Democratic Mass Media”. For 2002, our host university asked for courses in “Modern International Reporting” and the “Art of Reporting”. As a result, our instruction and interaction with journalism professionals, academics and students involved furthering Western news values and media practices. In general, this approach seemed well received by the young and tolerated by the old. Western news values promoted in the textbooks we brought from the United States appear welcome among students, who seem to enthusiastically endorse them as a liberating and empowering force. Outside the journalism courses taught by us and by several part-time US-educated Uzbek faculty, however, it is uncertain whether forums for open expression and balanced views exist within the university.

Instruction generally follows the top-down Soviet model that most of the faculty had been educated under. Tests usually ask for facts and statistics, not analysis. Students are not assigned research papers or presentations. And students are reluctant to openly challenge teachers. For example, a US-educated colleague intentionally told a class that New York City is the capital of the United States. One student tentatively raised her hand and said, in effect, that she had never lived or studied in the United States but had been taught that Washington is the capital. “No,” our colleague replied; “it’s New York,” and that ended the discussion.

Many senior journalism professors have advanced degrees in communication from presti-

gious Soviet universities or had worked for the press under the Soviet system.<sup>1</sup> Their own experiences—most pre-dating independence—are for the most part anachronistic. One newspaper journalism textbook (Potalueva and Seidova, 1983) published in Moscow drew its examples from the *Daily World*, *World Marxist Review* and other English-language communist papers. Representative leads include “Thirty years ago, the ‘cold war,’ unleashed by imperialism to hold back the popular forces that arose after World War II, spread terror on the world” (ibid., p. 50) and “Contrary to stories carried by the big business press, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union have had good neighborly relations since 1917, when the Soviet Union was born” (ibid., p. 29). A typical question in the textbook asks students, “Why did the old colonial masters unleash wars in Algeria, Vietnam, Congo, Korea?” (ibid., p. 52).

The best of the Soviet-era newspapers are no longer popular in Uzbekistan. Contemporary Uzbek newspapers lack a high standard of professionalism, and the best and most critical journalists are reluctant to risk government repression. Our Uzbek colleagues had an excellent command of classical mass media theories, although it’s difficult for them to update their knowledge due to a severe shortage of contemporary books, journals, computers and other academic resources. A full-time teacher at World Languages University may receive a monthly salary of only US\$20 to US\$25. The Faculty of International Journalism even lacked internet access while we taught there.

Teaching emphasizes lectures, not practical assignments that require field reporting and interviewing. In its Media Sustainability Index, the NGO International Research and Exchanges Board reported the results of a panel of Uzbek journalists who discussed their profession, including training and education issues. It noted, “Most panelists believe that qualifications of journalists are poor. In their experience, journalism school graduates do not have in-depth knowledge or skills in news production; nor do they have a sense of journalistic priorities and principles.”

The roots of this Soviet-shaped teaching model and the traditional emphasis on theory are common in the former Eastern bloc but

have serious long-term implications for the future of journalism in Uzbekistan. At a 1994 conference of journalism educators from Central and Eastern Europe and the United States, Dean Mills of the University of Missouri observed that journalism in that region and the former Soviet Union “placed emphasis on literary aspects, as opposed to the American model, where ‘fact-based journalism’ is considered more important” (Fliess, 1994, p. 5). At the same conference, Ray Hiebert of the American Journalism Centre in Budapest reported that in some countries in the region “practical work is simply ignored”. Hiebert asked, “And what can we say about journalism education in those instances where it’s basically theoretical?” (Fliess, 1994, p. 5). Meanwhile, mass communication programs in universities, as well as the profession in former communist countries of Eastern and Central Europe, are moving further and faster toward the Western model than are their counterparts in Uzbekistan. One reason might be the general futility of training young journalists in models of practice they can’t apply domestically because of rigid press controls.

### The State of the Uzbek Press

Uzbekistan, like the surrounding Central Asian nations of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, has struggled to establish its national identity since independence in 1991. The government has attempted to convince its citizens and the rest of the world that it is moving toward a democratic society and a market economy. However, the truth is that Uzbekistan deserves its reputation for having a tough, authoritarian regime with tough restrictions over human rights, political expression and economic openness, as well as a tightly controlled press system. This reputation was reinforced by the March 2002 CPJ report “Attacks on the Press”, which begins its section on Uzbekistan:

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Torture of political and religious dissidents remains commonplace under the brutal regime of President Islam Karimov. In February, writer Emin Usman died in detention, and the July death of imprisoned human rights activist Shovriq Rusi-

morodov confirmed the deteriorating political situation. Karimov has also cracked down on civil liberties by jailing thousands of Muslims under the pretext of fighting Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism ... Control of the media, including the Internet, is pervasive in Uzbekistan: The government monopolizes printing presses and newspaper distribution, finances the main newspapers, and has the power to grant or deny licenses to media outlets. (CPJ, 2002)

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As of January 2001, the National Press Center reported that there were 507 newspapers, 157 magazines, 51 radio and television stations and four information agencies registered with the government, most printed or broadcast in Uzbek or Russian (Juraev, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Yet the mass media in Uzbekistan have been rendered virtually irrelevant when it comes to playing an important role in the nation’s transformation toward the kind of democratic, social and economic change the government purports to advocate. In fact, the government in most cases impedes that transformation and development. Most of these obstacles are not new. Rather, they are inherited from the Soviet period, which began in Central Asia—much of it then known as Turkestan—after the Russian Civil War. Before the Revolution, Uzbekistan experienced 130 years of Russian colonialist occupation under the czars.

Throughout the Soviet Union the press was assigned the role of propagandist, collective agitator and educator, to build the Communist Party and to further Marxist-Leninist ideology. The guiding principle was subordination of the media to the Party, the single voice and agent of the working class. Although the press under the Soviet system did not favor free expression, it did push for a positive role for itself in society and acted as an agent of international propaganda for the Soviet system. So too in Turkestan. In his memoir of Turkestan under the Bolsheviks in 1918–19, British secret agent F. M. Bailey (1946, pp. 64–65) characterized the writers of major newspaper articles as “ignorant men with little knowledge of history or geography. The writer would take a few facts from an out-of-date book of reference, cut out what did not suit his argument, distort the rest so that it did, and add a few rhetorical expressions and slogans.” He also described a

newspaper that dared criticize the new commissars, saying, "It was immediately repressed and possession of a copy was severely punished. Needless to say the paper which optimistically had been numbered 'one' never got beyond this first copy."

Denis McQuail (1994) wrote that although the Soviet system remained authoritarian with regard to the press, the press itself could claim popular legitimacy as long as the political theory of communism could be sustained. The media were expected to be serious, while reflecting the diversity of social structure and culture within the sprawling nation. McQuail (1994, p. 128) concluded that the Soviet press did not compare badly with the performance of the Western press in this regard, but that model was abandoned with the break-up of the USSR.

Although the press in Uzbekistan has abandoned its advocacy of Marxism-Leninism, it has not found a powerful replacement ideology, except that of Uzbek nationalism. Most senior Uzbek journalists were trained under the Soviet model and have never experienced a time when they were allowed free expression. There is a valid fear that any real attempt to criticize the government or take an adversarial role will result in retribution, even imprisonment. One result: even if Karimov and his government were to genuinely allow press freedom for the Uzbek media, few editors, publishers or broadcasters have the experience or inclination to operate free of traditional restraints.

Karimov, the Uzbek Communist Party leader before independence, has called for positive reforms in mass media legislation, but powerful and entrenched forms of censorship and self-censorship have impeded those proposals. So has the continued intimidation and persecution of journalists advocating free expression. Self-censorship remains pervasive. The human rights monitoring organization Freedom House (Karatnycky, 2002, p. 575) reported, "The state severely restricts freedom of speech and of the press, allowing virtually no criticism of the authorities, particularly President Karimov. Consequently, self-censorship among print and broadcast journalists is widespread. The country's few private broadcast and print media outlets avoid political issues, are generally local

or regional in scope, and suffer from administrative and financial constraints."

There was some loosening of press restrictions when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced *perestroika*, or "restructuring", in the 1980s. This policy is said to have transformed the Uzbek Communist Party and opened the door to advocacy for national independence. On 1 September 1991, the Republic of Uzbekistan proclaimed its separation from the Soviet Union. At that time, the new government introduced many decrees supporting democratic reforms.

However, only two weeks later, on 15 September, following the dissolution of the Uzbek Communist Party, a law was implemented banning political party activism and political organization within state-owned factories, institutions or enterprises. At that time, most of the national economy was state owned or controlled, including most newspapers and broadcasting agencies. Also in 1991, the government ratified the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, possibly as a practical gesture accompanying the new nation's general economic and diplomatic overtures to the West.

Despite establishing a national human rights agency, Uzbekistan moved to institute "absolute" rule by the new president, Karimov. Stability and order were maintained at the expense of any movement toward democratic rights.

Threats from unstable countries bordering on the south—Tajikistan and Afghanistan—and terrorist bombings on 16 February 1999, allegedly targeting Karimov, provided convenient rationales for not implementing basic standards of human rights. Following five bomb blasts in Tashkent, killing 16 and injuring 130, there was a crackdown on suspected terrorist groups with possible ties to the assassination attempt, and a general increase in the level of authoritarianism. Those policies and rationales are likely to continue as a result of the impact of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks of 11 September 2001. Soon afterwards, Uzbekistan became a major staging area for US military incursions into adjoining Afghanistan and has received major US aid in return.

Karimov and his government may be at risk if the popularity of external and internal fundamentalist Islamic movements increases within Uzbekistan. That trend reflects the activity of forces that oppose both the United States as an imperial power and the current Uzbek government as authoritarian and repressive. Although overwhelmingly Muslim, the country is largely secular, and the government strongly discourages public religious activities. Particularly in the Ferghana Valley of eastern Uzbekistan, there have been expressions of strong fellowship with armed fundamentalist forces fighting in the mountains. Uzbeks distributing and sometimes merely possessing literature supporting religiously motivated insurgent movements have been arrested and given harsh prison sentences.

Even before the 11 September attacks, the government's battle with Islamic insurgency stepped up efforts to control the spread of independent information. In late June 2001, Karimov indicated that those not toeing the government line would be punished. Punishment extended even to innocuous statements of religious conservatism. Islamic women students in some universities cannot wear traditional Muslim clothing in classrooms; some dropped out in protest. In these ways, repression of religion hasn't changed significantly from Soviet times.

On the other hand, the long history of government repression of conservative religious expression might be credited with the general peacefulness in most of Uzbekistan and with a feeling of mutual tolerance among the disparate ethnic and religious groups who comprise its citizens. While the government is quick to react harshly to attempts to spread religious propaganda and incite insurgency, it is cautious about using such harsh measures against dissident journalists. This might be attributed to concern about how Uzbekistan is perceived by international human rights groups, economic development lenders, potential investors and international trade organizations. Because of such restrictions, it is difficult to gather and disseminate accurate news about Uzbekistan.

In addition to working under tight governmental restrictions, broadcasters must negotiate

the mandatory, highly bureaucratic annual media re-registration process. In 1999, Uzbekistan's licensing commission closed two progressive television stations over licensing issues. Station directors labeled the closures as politically motivated, citing their commitment to producing balanced reporting along international standards. Government officials, however, argued that the stations were uncooperative during the re-registration process. One result is a chilling effect on independent newsgathering and reporting.

Also, private media lack advertising income, resulting in small budgets for gathering and reporting news. Broadcast stations also struggle to meet the government's increasingly high technical standards. Poor salaries speed up job turnover. To succeed economically and maneuver through red tape, private broadcasters show pro-government tendencies – or else are owned by politically influential people. Those without connections run great risks in straying from the government line.

Internews-Uzbekistan country director Josh Machleder has reported on the plight of Shukhrat Babadjanov, a prominent independent journalist. When summoned to a criminal investigation brought by the state prosecutor in Tashkent, Babadjanov failed to show up for an appointment. Fearing for his safety, Babadjanov fled Uzbekistan. Fellow journalists who went to the prosecutor's offices to inquire about his disappearance were told that his questioning had been postponed. Foreign media, such as the BBC and Radio Liberty, reported that Babadjanov had left the country. Machleder (2001) described the situation as only one in a series of state actions against Babadjanov, who had previously been subjected to heavy police surveillance at his home.

The Babadjanov incident is particularly notable, according to Machleder, because of the fate of writer Emin Usman. Usman, a member of the Uighur ethnic minority of Central Asia and China, was dismissed from the Union of Writers of Uzbekistan in 2001, one month before his detention and brutal death in an Uzbek prison. Machleder said that Usman's death likely prompted Babadjanov to flee, rather than to risk arrest and death during detention. He also

said that independent journalists see the attack against Babadjanov as part of an overall strategy to silence journalists critical of government policy. Although repression of independent journalism is routine, Machleder said Babadjanov's persecution stands out. That's because Babadjanov is a high-profile journalist with strong support from international organizations and foreign diplomats, who had pressed the government to allow him to reopen his independent station.

Babadjanov's attempts to renew the ALC-TV license and his appeal of the ban drew international attention to the media crackdown. In a nearly two-year battle to reopen the station, he continually expressed his frustration that officials "didn't kill him, but didn't let him live either". Ultimately, a committee headed by the deputy prime minister officially refused to renew the license, stating that ALC-TV lacked the required recommendation from local officials and that the State Press Committee opposed renewal (CPJ, 2001, p. 504). Regarding the case, CPJ reported,

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Babadjanov, director of TV ALC, an independent station based in the town of Urgench, was charged with forgery. The charges relate to a 10-year-old letter of recommendation for Babadjanov that was evidently written by Babadjanov himself but signed by Ruzi Chariyev, a prominent Uzbek painter. The journalist, who is also a well-known artist, was applying to join the Uzbekistan Union of Artists. He claims that Chariyev asked him to draft the letter because Chariyev does not write well in Uzbek. According to information received by CPJ, Babadjanov was forced to flee Uzbekistan after the Tashkent prosecutor's office summoned him for questioning on August 6 in connection with the case. These charges came after prolonged government harassment of Babadjanov and TV ALC, which was forced off the air in November 1999 despite protests from thousands of Urgench residents and appeals from the international community. Since the closure, the Uzbek government has repeatedly denied Babadjanov's applications for a new broadcasting license. On July 24, 2001, Babadjanov was ordered to vacate his station's premises within a week because he had been refused a license again. CPJ protested this case in an August 14 letter to Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

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Another Internews-Uzbekistan account of government repression of independent media, "Editor's Ouster Has a Chilling Effect on Inde-

pendent-Minded Journalists in Uzbekistan", told how the removal of the widely respected editor of a leading Russian-language Tashkent daily newspaper, *Tashkentskay Pravda*, may have been the *coup de grâce* for freedom of expression. The article said that editor Alo Hojaev was ousted because he used his newspaper to promote greater awareness about state censorship practices. The editorial department of *Tashkentskaya Pravda* opened an exhibition called "Without Censorship"—the first of its kind in Central Asia. Hodjaev covered a wall with articles banned from publication. Journalists were encouraged to make their own contributions, and many did so. Consequently, the exhibition expanded greatly, with articles that Machleder claimed contained no state secrets and no calls for violence or discrimination, and none of which promoted other constitutionally prohibited activities.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has protested the harassment of the Uzbek media. In 2000, for example, the organization complained to Karimov, the US State Department and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (an independent US government agency, also known as the Helsinki Commission) about the imprisonment of three journalists. Radio reporter Shodiv Mardiev had been sentenced to 11 years for defamation and extortion. Muhammad Bekjanov and Iusuf Razimuradov were serving even longer terms for their role in *Erk*, the last opposition newspaper that was published by the Erk Democratic Party and which was later outlawed (CPJ, 2002, p. 244).

In January 2002, Mardiev was released under a presidential amnesty after serving four years because of his broadcast of a satirical story about local government corruption. "All my life I worked for my country. I'm so sorry my country abandoned their son and a reporter," he said a few months later at a World Press Freedom Day event. "If I did something really wrong, I agree to have more years in prison" (Freedman, 2002, p. 11A). Censorship and repression aren't always overt. For example, the authorities that sponsor *Tashkentskaya Pravda* announced an overhaul of its organizational and financial structure. The paper was to

“merge” with its Uzbek-language partner, *Toshkent Haquqati*, with one editor overseeing the joint publication. Thus Hodjaev, the editor, was rendered redundant, and a restructuring commission was appointed to oversee the merger. He claimed that officials had been seeking to oust him for some time, while the paper’s sponsors countered that only economic considerations motivated the merger. *Tashkentskaya Pravda* staff members, however, insisted the merger was clearly a political move and that the Uzbek-language edition was financially viable before the merger (Machleder, 2001).

As another example, the *Times of Central Asia*, published in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, called the Tashkent newspaper *Hurriyat* the most outspoken newspaper in Uzbekistan. It cited a 27 September 2001 *Hurriyat* article as an illustration of what it is to push the envelope in Uzbekistan. That article accused the United States of “excessive conceit, arrogance and ignoring others’ views” in its treatment of foreign nations such as Uzbekistan. Although the writer expressed sympathy about the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the tone of the article suggests that US foreign policy and economic actions to some degree justified retribution. Even such a mild press attack on the United States, when the government was currying US favor and furthering a stronger military alliance, was deemed dangerous, particularly in light of military operations extending from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan.

The writer, however, backed down in the last paragraph of the article, when he said, “Uzbekistan’s stance on international terrorism is expressed in our esteemed president’s [Karimov’s] speeches, his most authoritative tribunes and in his interviews. Uzbekistan is against any terrorism and violence in the world.” However, it is rather standard form in Uzbek journalism for newspapers to prominently praise Karimov in such articles (*Times of Central Asia*, 2001).

Evidence of media subservience to government control is ubiquitous. When one of the authors was asked to serve as foreign editor on *The Independent*, a new English-language paper in Tashkent, the staff was reluctant to show him page 1 of the first issue. They were delaying publication until Karimov’s birthday, and the

front page was reserved for a birthday tribute and a large photo of the president. It appeared that such an approach was the only way to ensure governmental blessing for launching the paper. Even so, the agency charged with approving publication held up printing of the paper, and, to our knowledge, copies were never released to the public.

### **The Impact of Western Journalism Education in Uzbekistan**

There is no research available on the impact of Western news values and conventions on the Uzbek press. Our postings resulted from a Fulbright assignment to teach “democratic journalism”. Of course, “democratic journalism” is a value-laden term, but the concept to us as journalism professors includes relatively free discourse, a range of opinions and a sense of social responsibility among a news organization’s staff.

Yet that style of journalism isn’t practiced or allowed in Uzbekistan. By the time we left, however, our Uzbek- and Russian-speaking students at the Faculty of International Journalism could identify a good news story and could locate and interview multiple sources. They could understand ethical issues regarding publishing or withholding certain information, write a good lead sentence and maybe throw in a little color and strong quotes into their writing to keep the audience reading.

Our students were the cream of the nation, with generally 125 admitted to the program each year. Overall, they appear highly motivated to find foreign employment, to emigrate and to obtain scholarships and fellowships to study abroad. Many are driven to live and travel abroad rather than spend their careers in Uzbekistan, and many have a strong desire to work for international news organizations. The university’s emphasis on “international journalism” appears aimed at preparing students to take jobs with foreign news services and media. Some possibly could report from abroad for Uzbek media, although few—if any—Uzbek news organizations now offer foreign postings.

The BBC is a regular local recruiter. Other students are preparing and competing for graduate programs at US, Japanese or European universities. In this way, there is a serious brain-drain effect, the most talented young people intending to leave home to succeed elsewhere. Some of our students have personally experienced censorship and self-censorship in their part-time jobs or internships and, unfortunately, there isn't much choice for those who want to be relatively free and independent journalists in Uzbekistan.

At the same time, some are committed to changing the system. Asked to list the major reasons they chose journalism, a small number cite a desire to help develop the profession and press freedom in their homeland.

Although Uzbek State World Languages University provides the pre-eminent journalism program in the nation, it doesn't have a student newspaper. While visiting the journalism program at the American University of Kyrgyzstan (AUK) in Bishkek, author Shafer identified its student newspaper as a possible model for what the Faculty of International Journalism could develop. In Bishkek there appeared to be few restrictions on the student press.

When an AUK journalism professor visited Tashkent as part of the Soros Foundation's Civic Education Project, to teach our students how to establish their own newspaper, there was a strong rejection from the World Languages University administration. Administrators cited difficulties in getting the paper licensed by the government, while voicing a general distrust of students' ability to publish responsibly.

### The Road Ahead

We saw little opposition from university administrators to teaching democratic news values and methods within the journalism curriculum. Our students learned to balance news stories and sources, and the importance of accuracy in reporting. They knew, however, they would not in the near future be practicing such reporting techniques in their own country.

Soon after author Freedman's arrival in Tashkent, he was invited to meet with the uni-

versity's new rector, Gayrat Shoumarov, a psychologist, who had assumed office only a few days earlier (6 February 2002). The rector repeatedly emphasized his interest in preparing students with practical skills to become international journalists. He remarked that when a physician makes a mistake one patient dies but when a journalist makes a mistake millions of people may be misled or hurt. He talked about "bad journalism" creating tensions, possibly even war, between nations. Freedman talked about the essential need to train journalism students to be as fair, balanced and accurate as possible within the realities of the system they work in. Freedman also explained that mistakes are inevitable but are less likely when journalists can get information from multiple sources representing differing viewpoints. And he told the rector that the adverse effects of mistakes are offset when the public can get news from more than one place.

Interestingly, the rector remarked that the Uzbek people believe what they read in their newspapers because it's all "true". That's part of the Uzbek people's ethnopsychology, he said.

In truth, there are major challenges to the speedy development and operation of a free press in Uzbekistan. Even if the government eases its controls, even if it became economically feasible for independent media to survive and prosper, and even if journalism students and young journalists were encouraged to adapt and adopt American-style reporting techniques. For example, government itself is tightly closed, and not even sessions of Parliament and its committees are open. The concept of freedom of information does not exist. People are understandably wary about being interviewed, whether they are government officials, business leaders or ordinary citizens. There is a societal acceptance of authoritarianism and self-censorship. Economic realities leave students without textbooks or affordable photocopying and internet facilities. The legacy of top-down teaching impedes the development of analytical skills.

Pressure from outside is unlikely to induce comprehensive change, and some observers contend that US government criticism of hu-

man rights abuses has softened since Uzbekistan started cooperating—including allowing the use of Uzbek airfields—in the war on terrorism.<sup>3</sup> On a visit to Tashkent in January 2002, the State Department official responsible for human rights mentioned the need for a “moral dimension” in foreign policy but spoke in generalities when asked how his department’s initiatives include supporting free mass media. Assistant Secretary of State Lorne Craner, who oversees the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, talked about a commitment to “see democracy in this region, to see it really take hold in both the political sense, in the mass media sense, the civil society sense, so we are continuing to emphasize, especially in Uzbekistan in particular, the mass media aspect and the civil society aspect of democracy”. But Uzbekistan, he conceded, has “a ways to go in the political sense,” adding, “If you look at the human rights side, there are a number of issues to be addressed” (Eurasianet.org, 2002).

Broad acceptance of an authoritarian media system poses another barrier for freeing the press. Unhappy as it makes many American journalists feel, Merrill (2002, p. 22) explained that many so-called Third World nations don’t want to follow a Western communication systems model:

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They do not think that government direction (even control) is necessarily bad... They trust the government more than they do individual media owners, who are often seen as greedy elitists. They see Western libertarian journalists as harmful to social stability and national development. And they see the Western journalism model as arrogant and based too solidly on economic or profit-making motivations. They want more control of the media for their country, not less. They want order, not chaos. They want more of a monolithic press, not a pluralistic one. They believe that government should have more power over communication.

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There is reason to believe that some Central Asian journalism students share those feelings. Oklahoma State University Professors Stanley Ketterer and Maureen J. Nemecek (2001) surveyed journalism students in adjoining, authoritarian Kazakhstan about their attitudes toward democracy. Among the results: almost 61 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a “leader with a strong hand to

preserve law and order” is normal in a democracy, and 36 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it’s normal in a democracy for a leader to “control the flow of information”. That difference, in results, the authors suggest, “is more consistent with non-Soviet journalistic principles and the primarily Western notion of [the] watchdog role of journalism in a democracy”. Meanwhile, 83 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that free speech and assembly are essential to democracy, and more than 56 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that Kazakhstan follows those principles. Their study hasn’t been replicated in Uzbekistan.

Uzbek journalism students won’t find role models elsewhere in the region because the situation in the neighboring republics remains distressingly similar. In Kazakhstan, the government harasses or shuts down independent press outlets and controls or otherwise influences most newspapers and printing, distribution and broadcast transmission facilities (Karatnycky, 2002, p. 293). Ketterer and Namecek (2001) noted that with licensing by state officials “the media under their jurisdiction cannot openly report what they know. If they do so, they can be investigated by the tax inspector, find themselves enmeshed in a difficult bureaucratic system, accused of negligence or worse, libel.”

In Turkmenistan, “freedom of speech and the press is severely restricted by the government, which controls all radio and television broadcasts and print media... The government revoked the licenses of all Internet service providers in May 2000, leaving only the state-owned Turkmentelekom to provide Internet access. In August, [President Saparmurat] Niyalov launched a new television station, the ‘Epoch of Turkmenbashi,’ devoted to covering his supposed accomplishments and initiatives” (Karatnycky, 2002, p. 551). In Tajikistan, Freedom House reports severely curtailed media freedom, and “independent journalists continue to be threatened by removal of their accreditation, denial of access to state printing facilities” (Karatnycky, 2002, pp. 527–28). Things aren’t much different in Kyrgyzstan. Although “there is some degree of press freedom”, the press remains vulnerable to government pressure, all

media must register with the Ministry of Justice and “an article in the criminal code regarding libel is used to prosecute journalists who criticize government officials” (Karatnycky, 2002, p. 313).

Ironically, Afghanistan may be one beacon of hope in Central Asia. After the media repression and censorship of the Soviet era and the Taliban, in February 2002 the interim government adopted a press freedom law that officially leaves journalists free to criticize the government. Interim President Hamid Karzai said, “People can have their newspapers, people can have their radios and they can write things, they can criticize us as much as they want.” The BBC reported that some Afghan journalists already have raised questions about accountability and corruption. And though the state retains control of broadcasting and most newspapers, some independent magazines are now published (Voss, 2002).

What if there is success in building a free press and training skilled, independent journalists in Uzbekistan? That, too, carries potential risks. Writing in the context of contemporary Russia, some observers warn of a possible public backlash from the use of “adversarial journalistic techniques of the American mode” (Morrison, 1987, p. 33). That unintended consequence could prove true in Uzbekistan as well.

### Summary and Conclusions

For journalists, journalism students and journalism educators, the road ahead in Uzbekistan will be rough for the foreseeable future. Although the Constitution provides the legal basis for a free press system, the mass media remain tightly controlled. With armed conflicts on its borders, the Uzbek government says it is justified in being cautious.

So far Karimov has allied itself with the West in its war against terrorism. Uzbekistan has hosted a growing Western military presence near its narrow border with Afghanistan, and Karimov visited Washington in March. The Western nations allied with the US are put in the dilemma of befriending Karimov despite his iron rule. The threat of strife in Uzbekistan is particularly daunting while America, Britain

and their allies are trying to stabilize Afghanistan. Pushing reforms in what is currently a peaceful and cooperative Uzbekistan is unlikely to be a priority in Washington or London. Still, there are signs that press restrictions are easing

There is reason to hope that progressive forces will triumph and that controls will be further lifted. Given the 97 per cent literacy rate and a high potential for economic development due to an advanced industrial infrastructure, high agricultural production and abundant natural resources, a free press could flourish with political change. Much depends on security of international borders and resolution of conflicts among the dominant Uzbeks and ethnic minorities advocating greater tolerance and cultural integration.

Despite limitations within the university system upon educating journalism students effectively, we believe they can acquire the basics of Western journalism practices and conventions, and that they are economically, if not politically, determined to acquire them. Oddly, despite heavy repression of the mass media, the classroom environment appeared relatively free of constraints. By learning the conventions and practices of good journalism, students could understand what freedom of the press is. To encourage press freedom, attention to journalism education is a productive approach in countries like Uzbekistan. It makes sense to prepare a cadre of skilled journalists who are ready to work for a newly liberated press.

We found it unnecessary for Westerners to teach mass media theory and ideology, because Uzbek academics are familiar with and competent to teach classical Western media theories they learned in the more tolerant era at the end of Soviet rule. What they most often lack is familiarity with practical Western skills, such as those related to universal news values, gathering information, interviewing, balancing sources, distancing from the power structure, writing news clearly and effectively, maintaining independence, engaging in the watchdog role and maintaining reader interest. Visiting scholars can best be used in teaching these skills that, as applied, reflect the ideology of a free press system. Western instructors also can

educate students in the protections offered to Uzbek journalists in their own Constitution.

It is also important to educate government officials to be effective and cooperative sources and contacts for news and information. These officials should be encouraged and educated to work with community journalists, who are themselves trained to be socially responsible, professional and competent. Currently, media are not viewed as either an important ally of government or an important control on

official corruption and abuse. The authorities don't understand the potential role of media in promoting positive change, but rather view them as a threat to their political positions and livelihoods. Visiting media scholars might also develop seminars and workshops for government officials. Content might include techniques and conventions that will allow these officials to deal openly with newly liberated and aggressive news-gatherers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a discussion of journalism education in the Soviet Union, see Morrison (1987).
- <sup>2</sup> However, many of those media outlets are small. For example, a parliamentary committee reported that *Almalyk Haqiqati* (*Almalyk Truth*), a Tashkent-area newspaper, had a circulation of 750 in a city with more than 100,000 residents. ([www.uzreport.com](http://www.uzreport.com), "Uzbek Deputies Discuss Work of Tashkent Region Media", 22 April 2002).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Brzezinski (2001).

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