

H-Net Reviews

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Eric Freedman, Richard Shafer. *After the Czars and Commissars: Journalism in Authoritarian Post-Soviet Central Asia.* Eurasian Political Economy and Public Policy Studies Series. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011. 299 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-005-4.



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In a 2007 interview, Kyrgyz President Rosa Otunbayeva despaired of both her country's progress and the media's ability to contribute to that progress. "We are in eternal transition. We stick in this eternal transition. We want to join the modern world, but the press does not help us to join the recognized world. The press does not have the capacity to help us do that.... It's not a good time for media in Kyrgyzstan. It's all the time a very fragmented media" (p. 134). Many of the authors' findings do not indicate great hope for democratic media in the region or for the media's ability to promote citizens' rights. This collection provides an important reference on these issues for media students and scholars researching the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. The collection's authors include scholars and professionals from the region as well as experts from Europe and the United States who have expertise on the ground and who display this excellently in many of the chapters.

The edited collection is divided into five parts. The first section reviews the Soviet roots of the press in post-Soviet Central Asia. Part 2 takes a "nationalist" perspective on the media systems in the five "stans," while chapters in the third section take trans-regional perspectives on the media in Central Asia. Journalism education is the topic of two chapters in the fourth section, and two

chapters in part 5 examine new media in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In part 1, Richard Shafer's review of the roots of the press systems in post-Soviet Central Asia is a brief but adept account of the political structures in the region from its days as Turkestan at the dawn of Russian colonization in the 1860s through tsarist censorship and into attempts to replace the Soviet media model with a Western-based model. He makes the point that, unlike the Baltic states, Central Asia had no tradition of a pre-Soviet media to which to return. In addition, Western trainers, fixated on passing on the skills of Western-style journalism, never stood still long enough to consider if what they were communicating constituted a foundation for media professionalism or a nascent commitment to the notion of a need for an objective, watchdog press.

The second section reviews the media systems country by country. It begins with a chapter by Barbara Junisbai on media ownership and money-wielding oligarchs in control of Kazakhstan's media. The author considers why—given the serious penalties facing anyone who oversteps the bounds of permissible coverage in Kazakhstan's authoritarian political system—the nongovernmental press and national television have periodically

risked repression to tackle episodes of graft and corruption scandals involving members of the oligarchy and Nazarbaev family members.

Next, Luca Anceschi examines how censorship and systematic repression of dissenting voices in post-Soviet Turkmenistan have kept it as one of the worst offenders on the various lists compiled annually by Reporters sans Frontières and the Committee to Protect Journalists. Irina Wolf provides a perspective on the Kyrgyz media by using quantitative and interview-based study of newspaper coverage of an extremist religious organization in the country's largest paper for five years from 2001 through 2005. This is the first quantitative research on the coverage of religious extremism in Central Asia. Wolf found that Kyrgyz journalists seemed unable to balance coverage of the extremists and appeared not to understand that by sensationalizing their coverage of the extremists they were in effect furthering the extremists' cause.

Zhanna Hãrdegen surveys Internet control in Uzbekistan to understand that country's general approach to media control. Unlike many developing countries, connectivity is not an issue since the Uzbek government has demonstrated a strong commitment to developing its infrastructure to grant its citizens access to the web. Yet, when the country gave up its monopoly on access in 2002, it traded that for "the most extensive and pervasive state mandated filtering system in Central Asia" (p. 99). The chapter explores Uzbek legal regulation of access to information "on the grounds of information security of the individual, society, and state" (p. 100).

In the last of the national chapters, Peter Gross and Timothy Kenny view the press in Tajikistan through the lens of journalistic self-censorship caused by restrictive regulations. Journalists in Tajikistan who anger the government are jailed, often under secretive media regulations that were passed in May 2005. Short of jail, if they step out of line, they face harassment, intimidation, firing, or worse. The authors argue that censorship and self-censorship spring from the same cultural, political, and economic roots. A valuable insight from this research reflects the Turkic origins of culture in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and cultural relationships to information. Turkic oral culture engages in something known as "the long ear"—the spread of information from person to person where each teller takes literary license as he or she passes on the "facts" of an event or issue. Thus, what may have been fact or rumor to start and much altered at the finish is far more believable to community members

than even unvarnished, objective reporting they might hear on television, particularly on television, since they are used to NOT believing in what they hear from media.

The first chapter on regional issues examines press law and press misbehavior in Central Asia through interviews and meetings with newspaper editors, TV and radio producers, other journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government bodies, and press freedom/human rights groups in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan between 2003 and 2005. Author Olivia Allison concludes that a media outlet's loyalty to the government fundamentally affects whether and what type of enforcement occurs.

In the second regional chapter, Olivier Ferrando examines ethnic minorities and the media in Central Asia. The Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Tajiks, and Uzbeks were promoted to the rank of "nationalities" under the Soviets and entitled to media published in their own languages. When the old weak boundaries became national borders, what had been favored nationalities became majority and minority ethnic populations. The Central Asian public sphere is fragmented along ethnic lines and ethnic minority media contribute to this fact because they target their audience through language.

The third regional chapter considers the human impact of the region's press constraints. Eric Freedman provides an overview of the types of dangers facing journalists and the groups outside that try to monitor press conditions. At heart, however, the chapter humanizes the problem facing the journalists, telling the stories in their own words. While acknowledging the lack of access to accurate and reliable news in Central Asia, Navbahor Imamova questions whether international broadcasting can fill the information vacuum in Uzbekistan. While she focuses her overview on the history of U.S. radio and web broadcasting from outside, the author notes that the government harasses and detains the stringers who report for BBC, VOA, and RFE/RL, making it increasingly difficult for external news organizations to access information. Domestic media portray them as enemies of the state and tools of anti-Uzbek forces, while forces in Washington argue against the continued expenditure of resources.

The final three chapters look at the development of journalism education in Kazakhstan, Internet libel law, and the role samizdat blogs played in bringing down a Kyrgyz dictator. The libel law chapter reviews the development of libel amendments and suggests their possible impacts on Internet use and freedom in the Common-

wealth of Independent States, and then examines the impact more specifically on criminal libel laws and considers possible implications for Tajikistan. The final chapter examines how and whether an advocacy blog served as a solution to deliver information to people who could not access blocked and hacked sites. There was little original content on the blog, most of it coming from traditional media, outside reports from NGOs, and expatriates. Republishing the material on the blog made it more accessible for users, saving them the time and trouble to seek it out on twenty to thirty different sites.

This collection is worth a look because most of the authors provide knowledgeable contributions on their respective topics. The introduction fails at its task by resorting to inadequate American media theory to support its purpose. A rudimentary search would have turned up a plethora of media and comparative government scholars working on post-Soviet states and media.[1] Still, the individual authors have produced helpful and relevant chapters that provide a welcome introduction to the major issues confronting the region.

Note

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[1]. For example, see Arnold S. De Beer and John Calhoun Merrill, *Global Journalism: Topical Issues and Media Systems* (Boston: Pearson, 2004); Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Michael Emerson, Richard Youngs and Leila Alieva, *Democracy's Plight in the European Neighbourhood: Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009); Andrea Berg and Anna Kreikemeyer, *Realities of Transformation: Democratization Policies in Central Asia Revisited* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2006); Andrea Berg, *An Atmosphere of Quiet Repression: Freedom of Religion, Assembly and Expression in Kazakhstan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008); *Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia 2008* (London: Routledge, 2007); Ivan Zarskii, *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2004); and Daniel L. Burghart and Theresa Sabonis-Helf, *In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century* (Washington DC: National Defense University, Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2004).