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Coverage of the Central Asian political, press, and speech rights issues by independent news websites

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Since independence in 1991, the Central Asian republics to varying degrees have given lip service to democratization and the recognition of free press and political rights. However, the reality has been dramatically different under all five authoritarian regimes. That reality includes limits or bans on opposition parties, as well as elections that are neither fair nor free. Most mass media entities remain state-owned or tightly controlled, and there is pervasive censorship, self-censorship, harassment, and intimidation of individual journalists and their media organizations. One result is inadequate, shallow reporting about political, press, and speech rights and controversies. Western-based Web news sites provide alternative venues for some Central Asian journalists to independently cover such issues. This study analyzes the coverage of political, press, and speech rights news on three such sites: Eurasianet, IRIN News, and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. It examines the topics covered, the degree to which these stories use unnamed and named sources, and the proportion of journalists writing under pseudonyms. It concludes that even journalists reporting on these issues for Western-based media operate under tight constraints, including the risk of official retaliation.
Introduction

To varying degrees, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have given lip service to democratization and the recognition of free press and political rights since their independence in 1991. The reality, however, has been dramatically different under authoritarian regimes marred by wide-scale corruption, favoritism, and machinations—both subtle and blatant—to retain power. Despite constitutional pronouncements, that reality includes limits or bans on opposition parties, as well as elections that are neither fair nor free. While changes are apparently underway in Kyrgyzstan due to the March 2005 popular uprising that ousted President Askar Akayev and the country’s subsequent first free and fair presidential election, most mass media entities elsewhere in the region remain state-owned or tightly controlled, and there is pervasive censorship, self-censorship, harassment, and intimidation of individual journalists and media organizations.

Does “news” happen and do public policy problems disappear if they go unreported? There lies a major dilemma for professional journalists and the public in Central Asia. Certainly, “news” about political, press, and speech rights occurs, ranging from distinct events—an order banning a political party, prosecution of a dissident journalist, or a street protest—to systemic, often long-range developments such as the impact of the Internet on dissemination of public affairs information, the effects of better training for professional journalists with funding from Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and multinationals, and efforts to organize new parties. On the other hand, reporters and editors face severe legal, economic, and practical constraints if they try to cover these issues in ways that may offend their regimes. Since domestic media outlets have been unwilling or unable to cover much serious political, press, and speech rights news—particularly news that suggests official corruption, hypocrisy, negligence, malfeasance, or ignorance—what alternative venues do Central Asian journalists and the public have to tell and hear the “news?”

This article examines three Western-based Web news sites that provide electronic venues for journalists who cover such issues. Their stories are reported and written primarily by independent journalists based in these countries or by journalists who are affiliated with state or officially authorized media but who also freelance for independent media outlets. It analyzes the types of stories published about freedom and restraints on the mass media and on citizens, as well as stories about political freedom and restraints posted on Eurasianet (www.eurasianet.org), IRIN News (www.irinnews.org), and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net). It looks at how these stories incorporate anonymous and named sources, as well as the proportion of stories written by journalists under the perceived relative shield of pseudonyms. That analysis is placed in the context of language limitations and the difficulty of Internet access for most Central Asians.

Political Setting

After the Soviet Union collapsed and the republics declared independence, the same leaders who had run those countries and their communist parties remained in power, albeit under the guise of new party names. The countries adopted constitutions that provided for a balance of power among the branches of government and nominally
recognized individual rights, including political, press, and speech rights. For example, Article 8 of the Tajikistan constitution promises “political and ideological pluralism.” Articles 28-30 profess to guarantee “the right to participate in the formation of political parties,” “to participate in lawfully established meetings, protests, demonstrations, and peaceful marches,” and “the freedoms of speech and the press, as well as the right to use information media.” Similarly, although most of the governments have signed major international human rights conventions, there is what Tadjbakhsh (2004, 179) described as “a sharp contrast between their endorsement and their implementation in practice.”

However, report after report by foreign governments, multinational organizations, and NGOs including the U.S. State Department, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, have criticized the regimes for abusing individual rights. So have Central Asian political activists and journalists now abroad, such as the exiled leaders of the banned Erk and Birlik opposition parties from Uzbekistan. Such criticisms arise internally as well, often at risk to the speaker, writer, or activist. In his book, Bakhriev (2003, 55), a former member of Uzbekistan’s Oly Majlis and founder of the independent newspaper *Hurriyat*, wrote bluntly that his country has “no independent civil society organizations (including political parties, public associations, trade unions).”

Many of the 122 news stories covered by this study reported on acts of political repression. They reported on such events and controversies in 2003 as: student protests over the firing of Samarkand State University’s rector; a referendum allowing Tajik President Imomali Rahmonov to stay in office for an extra seven years; new restrictions on NGOs in Turkmenistan; a hunger strike by women whose relatives were fatally shot during protests in Kyrgyzstan; and obstruction of opposition party candidacies in local elections in Kazakhstan. One *Eurasianet* article (2003) minced no words, saying: “These are the times that try the will of Central Asian opposition movements to resist government pressure. In three Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan—opposition movements are buckling as those countries’ leaders take action to stamp out domestic criticism.”

Western multinational organizations and foreign governments are openly skeptical of purported democratization and regime promises to improve their records on political, press, and speech rights. For instance, the OSCE team that monitored the September 2004 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan concluded that the voting failed to meet OSCE and Council of Europe standards. There are finally a few signs that foreign funders are willing to impose sanctions for repeatedly failing to live up to those pledges. In April 2004, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2004) suspended most public loans in Uzbekistan because of “very limited progress” in achieving promised human rights and press freedom benchmarks. In July 2004, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declined to certify Uzbekistan for up to US$18m in foreign aid, citing “lack of progress on democratic reform and restrictions put on U.S. assistance partners on the ground” (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Powell’s action represented a turnaround from previous U.S. policy; earlier in the year, the Bush administration had cited national security as its rationale for why Uzbekistan could remain in a cooperative threat reduction program despite a human
rights record that fell below participation standards (Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2004).

**Mass Media Setting**

Well after independence, mass media continue to reflect the governmental controls that characterized seventy years of Soviet rule. The five constitutions nominally guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of expression. For example, Article 16 of the Kyrgyzstan Constitution states: “Every person in the Kyrgyz Republic shall enjoy the right … to free expression and dissemination of one’s thoughts, ideas, opinions, freedom of literary, artistic, scientific and technical creative work, freedom of the press, transmission and dissemination of information.” Although it is too soon to measure the long-term impact of the “Tulip Revolution” on press freedom, early indications give reason for optimism that the constitutional provisions will be honored (IRIN News, 2005). In a World Press Freedom statement less than two months after Akayev fled, the media training NGO Internews observed, “Indeed, the media are working with much more freedom than before. And they have the added responsibility of covering the many major changes taking place within Kyrgyz society. In such a situation, the role played by journalists is more crucial than ever. The entire population now turns to the media to follow daily events” (Internews, 2005).

Still, most print and broadcast mass media in Central Asia remain state-owned or tightly controlled. Journalists exercise self-censorship, whether or not their governments maintain official censorship. In Kazakhstan, for instance, “even reporters working for privately owned newspapers seem to be toning down any criticism of government policy” in the aftermath of prosecutions of other journalists (Abisheva, 2003). Press organs and the journalists who work for them, as well as independent journalists, face prison, physical attacks, assassination, exile, harassment, loss of jobs and compulsory licenses, tax audits, monopoly printing houses, destruction of property, burglary of newsrooms, pressure on advertisers, and costly civil and criminal libel litigation (Shafer & Freedman, 2003; Freedman & Shafer, 2003). Sigal and Machleder (2003) examined the ramifications for independent television journalists who had covered homelessness, hazing in the military, governmental closure of a television station, and pension fund abuse. They wrote, “Common to these stories is the attempt of Central Asian governments to maintain official national narratives by silencing alternative perspectives.” Khamagayev (2002, 1) observed, “Investigative reporting in the true sense of the word is a rarity in Central Asian countries. Political partiality, pressures from authorities and criminal groups, and meager wages are major factors hampering progress in this sphere.”

Meanwhile, journalists’ prestige in society has diminished since Soviet days. Poorly paid, many supplement their income by freelancing for foreign news agencies. Zokirova (2003) reported that most journalists in Tajikistan earn only US$20-$30 a month, “but even that sum is not guaranteed since most of the private companies do not offer contracts to staff.” Freelance payments by Western Internet news organizations can be substantial in contrast to a journalist’s monthly salary from a fulltime job with a state-owned or subsidized news organization that could be US$25 or less. An IRIN stringer fee of US$15—25 per 100 words for a single 500-word
article would match three to five months’ salary; IRIN pays more for photos. IWPR’s scale is confidential, but one article may earn the freelancer more than several months’ salary for a state-employed journalist in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan; in Kazakhstan where journalists’ salaries are higher, a freelance payment would be significant but less than two to three months’ salary. Journalists also supplement their salaries with tutoring, translating, or other economic activity.

The implications of press constraints affect the public at large. For example, even when major politics-related events occur, the mainstream media’s performance falls short: Uzbek media coverage of the spring 2004 bombings there has been labeled a “dismal failure” marked by the absence of analytical reporting (Filatov, 2004). Bakhriev detailed how censorship, self-censorship, unethical practices, lack of economic and professional resources, secret decision-making, and restraints on the media impair not only democracy but also development and the regime’s professed commitment to a market economy; he also criticized the “myth” that the nation “is not ready for democracy and freedom of speech (2003, 54). Wei et al. (2003) found little public confidence there in the mass media, especially Uzbek-language newspapers; such news organizations are not highly trusted as information sources. A reporter from the Ahal Durmishi newspaper in Turkmenistan, which has no independent media, was quoted as saying that the reputation of the country’s press is so low that journalists are treated with contempt. That account said, “The public has little time for the state newspapers’ continual diet of adulation of the head of state. Hundreds of unsold copies are bought in bulk by street vendors who use them to make the paper cones in which they sell sunflower seeds, or by people who need cheap table covers for weddings” (Hallyev, 2004).

Juraev (2002) classified the five press systems into three models: “authoritarian-democratic” in Kazakhstan and pre-Tulip Revolution Kyrgyzstan; “post-conflict” in Tajikistan; and “total control” in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Similar efforts to categorize international press systems date back a half-century (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), and their relevance, accuracy, analytical value have come under scholarly critique (for example, see Merrill & Nerone, 2002). However, even if precise demarcations as Juraev’s are impossible, the similarities of the five systems over the first fourteen years of independence outweigh the differences when evaluated by foreign press rights advocates, Western governments, and multinational agencies. They also reflect the long-held belief among these governments that individual journalists and their press organizations should help create a sense of national identity and statehood rather than acting as watchdogs and agenda-setters in the style of U.S. and Western European media (Muminova, 2002).

While international pressure has led to relief for some individual imprisoned journalists, the overall practical impact of such critiques and interventions is uncertain. Bakhriev (2003) asserted that only internal pressures, not pressures from foreign organizations, can improve journalistic practices. Spence (2003) agreed, writing that U.S. influence “rarely changed policy outcomes” concerning media, civil society, or rule-of-law reform” in Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Ukraine “by providing diplomatic carrots or sticks to change the behavior of policymakers.” He noted that the United States had rarely curtailed bilateral aid to punish undemocratic behavior there and wrote that politicians in those governments said that “even if the U.S. had tried to cut off money, the funds were not enough to make much of a difference.”
Meanwhile, any reforms in formal, university-level journalism education have been slow, where such programs exist at all. In fact, the concept of formal university education in journalism is comparatively new in what was the Soviet Union, dating only to post-World War II, when, as Johnson (1999, 21) wrote, its development reflected a “new professionalism” among journalists in the 1950s after Stalin’s death. Hallyev (2004) observed, “Turkmen universities don’t train reporters, and the state forbids us to employ those who graduated from journalism schools in Russia or Uzbekistan after 1993.” Central Asian universities, virtually all state-run, largely adhere to the Soviet model of top-down lecturing, with an emphasis on theory (Gross, 1999). Teaching methods and curricula offer few practical assignments and discourage analytical thinking in the classroom. As Shafer and Freedman (2003) noted, there is widespread academic dishonesty, and faculty members generally either lack significant professional experience or received their experience under the Soviet press system.

Western-based organizations, including OSCE, Internews, International Center for Journalists, Open Society Institute, Index on Censorship, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Freedom House, sponsor training and workshops for professional journalists (Freedman & Shafer, 2003). Yet prospects for improved professionalism on a large scale are impeded by sparse resources; low pay for journalists and journalism educators; lack of media independence; lack of societal acceptance of such news values as fairness, accuracy, ethics, and balance; and inadequate training. As Muminova (2002) explained, there is a socio-political philosophy that prefers the press to serve as an agent of nationalism with a primary obligation to the state and government, not to the public. Western trainers also incur hostility from government. In September 2004, for example, a Tashkent court closed Internews-Uzbekistan for six months for allegedly violating a law that regulates NGOs (Boboev & Karimov, 2004).

In addition, there are practical limits to what trainers can accomplish through what Shafer, Freedman, and Rice (2005) call democratic journalism seminars and workshops. Such training, they explained, has been concerned principally with news gathering and reporting based on the journalistic conventions of mainstream and commercial newspapers and broadcasters in the United States and, to a lesser degree, other Western nations; they are often limited to a few days or weeks. Also, potential participants may be deterred by hostility from their employers, suspicion from their governments, and from the fact that they not be paid for time off the job.

**Convergence of Political and Mass Media Settings**

Tightly restricted media and shortfalls in professionalism contribute significantly to the scarcity of substantive reporting, including investigative and analytical reporting, about political, press, and speech rights issues. At the same time, journalists find it difficult to obtain information about governmental activities and policies regarding these issues.

Much of the in-depth reporting about Central Asian political, press, and speech rights issues that does occur appears through Western media outlets such as BBC or Russia-based news organizations, both traditional and Internet-based. Western journalists who report from the region often incorporate doom-and-gloom perspectives in their
stories. As outsiders, they may find it more difficult than domestic journalists to find sources.

News Web Sites Studied

For independent journalists in and from Central Asia, Western-based news websites provide alternative outlets for their reporting. This study examines the type of political, press, and speech rights stories posted on Eurasianet, IRIN News, and IWPR. The study chose those sites because they are non-governmental, do not charge users for access, and provide a significant amount of English-language coverage about a wide range of public affairs issues. Most stories are original, unlike some foreign-based sites such as Fergana.ru that primarily repost articles generated by other news organizations. In addition to Web availability, each offers free e-mail newsletter subscriptions.

- Eurasianet is affiliated with New York City-based Open Society Institute’s Central Eurasia Project and provides news and analysis about the five republics, Afghanistan, Turkey, Mongolia, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Its coverage includes political and press rights, economics, and human rights. Some articles appear in Russian as well as English.

- IRIN News is operated by Integrated Regional Information Networks, part of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Its Central Asia coverage includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, as well as the five republics. Stories focus on such themes as democracy and governance, the economy, health and nutrition, gender issues, and human rights. It posts Central Asia stories in English but not Russian.

- IWPR is a London-based media development charity that covers areas of conflict including Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Caucasus. Articles deal with the press, human rights, and social issues, among other topics. Articles are posted in English and Russian.

Most residents of the five countries do not read English; many do not read Russian. These sites do not translate articles into ethnic languages such as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Kazakh, Turkmen, Uighur, or Karakalpak.

Restrictions on Internet Access

While these outlets can provide information to people within and outside Central Asia, limited Internet availability, relatively high expense, and lack of familiarity with computer technology among the vast majority of Central Asians — even in urban areas — means proportionately few residents read them directly. There is limited Internet access and limited training in Internet skills. Personal computer ownership and even cybercafes are unaffordable for most people. Less than 1 percent of Uzbekistan’s population uses the Internet (Pannier, 2003). Wei et al. (2003) found that the Internet is the least-used source of information about elected officials and health issues in Uzbekistan, less popular than family, friends, neighborhood, television, radio, newspapers, and posters. International efforts to expand access is underway, led by NGOs such as Freedom House and IREX, which operate centers with free access and training for journalists, community NGO leaders, and other individuals.
Even for journalists, the Internet is not a regular part of how they work. In January 2004, Freedom House sponsored training sessions in Samarkand, Namangan, and Tashkent for about sixty professional journalists from Uzbekistan. Forty-one percent of participants surveyed by the author reported using the Internet less than once a week or never in their reporting and research. Fifty-four percent reported no Internet access at their newspaper, radio station, or television station.

There is also the blockage problem. The government of Uzbekistan blocked some foreign sites after articles were posted alleging official corruption, and Wei et al. (2003) found that 42 percent of respondents in that country believed that the government monitors Internet activity; 46 percent agreed that users cannot access some sites because of government policies. Ozod Ovoz, the Organization for Assistance to Freedom of Speech in Uzbekistan, advised that users of its site should try to gain access through anonymous proxy servers, whose Web addresses it listed, if its own site is blocked or difficult to open. Reporters without Borders (2003) has complained about government blockage of Web sites run by opposition groups or carrying independent news critical of the president and reporting about official corruption in Kazakhstan.

Although most Central Asians cannot directly access the three sites studied, and although they post predominantly in English with some stories available in Russian, that is not to say that these sites lack potential impact or influence within the region. Central Asians who read these sites are generally better educated, more influential, and, perhaps, leaders or potential leaders in government, business, academia, media, or NGOs. Central Asian journalists who read stories on these sites may in some instances follow up with stories of their own for their own news outlets. Bukharbaeva and Samari (2003) observed, “With the arrival of the Internet, information has become accessible to more people—certainly the elite—and officials are more likely to be forced to react to controversial reporting that digs up facts they would prefer to bury.” In addition to postings on Russian-language sites, stories may be picked up by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty for translation and broadcast in Russian or ethnic languages. IRIN News and IWPR charge no fee for reuse of their stories. Eurasianet generally makes content available for free with permission. IWPR programme manager Saule Mukhametrakhimova (2004) explained, “If you want to reach a wide audience in Central Asia, you rely on republication in the local press” in ethnic languages. Some stories are reprinted in the English-language weekly Times of Central Asia; the Bishkek-based newspaper circulates throughout the region and operates its own site, www.times.kg, making the paper more accessible to tourists and other visitors, predominantly from business, diplomacy, and NGOs.

Previous Research

Research is expanding about Central Asian mass media issues, such as press freedom and constraints, mass media systems and economics, journalism education, and professional journalism training. Yet with a few exceptions (see Freedman, 2004; Freedman & Walton, 2004), there has been little examination of how journalists cover public affairs in the region and little analysis of the types of stories reported on news Web sites that extensively cover Central Asia. There also has been comparatively little academic research about Internet access and use in the region (see Kolko, 2003; Saunders, 2003), although such studies are now receiving some
grant support, including projects underwritten by the National Science Foundation and IREX.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Confronting a flood of news developments and events regarding political, press, and speech rights, journalists must exercise professional judgment in deciding which of those stories—if any—to cover. Their decisions reflect many considerations, some related to newsworthiness, which includes timeliness, proximity, and impact (Mencher, 2000). Other influences exist too, such as: availability of staff or freelance reporters to cover a story in light of competing demands for their time; travel and other expenses; ease or difficulty of access to affected locations; available sources; potential adverse reactions; and space or air time that can be allocated to the stories. Thus:

RQ 1: What political, press, and speech rights stories are these three Web sites likely to cover?

The credibility of sources cited in stories relates directly to public trust and confidence in a news outlet. Adherence to fundamental professional values such as accuracy, fairness, independence, and balance depends partly on the type and caliber of sources used. Journalists in the West who cover conflict and controversy are trained to seek diverse sources, including stakeholders, partisans, independent experts, and ordinary people. Anonymous sources are discouraged and disfavored because of concerns about credibility, manipulation, and ethics. Smith (2003, 174) used the phrase “dark side of secret sources” in discussing the motives of public and political figures who request anonymity. He suggested that journalists consider the importance of a story, a source’s motives and professed reasons for anonymity, lack of alternative sources, and competitive factors before hiding a source’s identity. In Central Asian media, most named sources are governmental officials or other members of the elite; there is comparatively little coverage of the views and observations of private citizens. As an IWPR article about political rights in Turkmenistan noted, “Even members of the public with no possible connection to the November (2002) attack (on President Saparmurat Niazov) are in danger of arbitrary arrest. Those who spoke to IWPR did so on the basis of anonymity, and expressed fear” (Kakabaev, 2003).

Sean Crowley, the managing editor for IRIN Asia, said (2003), “We try and keep unidentified sources to a minimum but recognize the need to use them in Central Asia where there is no culture of public information and identifying a contributor can be detrimental to that person’s health."

Eurasianet editor Justin Burke (2004) explained why stories on his site use unnamed sources:

It’s a product of the totalitarian environment of Central Asia. In many cases, I know who the (reporters’) sources are. The use of unidentified sources is needed to protect those wanting to provide information. If the names of sources appeared in print on Eurasianet, which is widely monitored by
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regional governments, there is a credible fear that the sources would suffer consequences.

Therefore:

**RQ 2:** How do the sites use named and unnamed in stories about political, press, and speech rights?

Reporters for Western media organizations rarely use pseudonyms because bylines are a form of recognition for professional accomplishment and success, especially on investigative or otherwise hard-hitting, analytical, or in-depth articles. Opinion-makers and members of the public may reach out to reporters whose work they admire, enjoy, or respect to provide congratulations and—more importantly to working journalists—news tips and ideas for future stories. Reporters whose bylines appear on stories that generate further developments, such as an arrest, reform legislation, or political changes may receive public praise, and professional recognition such as awards and promotions.

Not so in Central Asia, where those with power and influence at the national, regional (such as an *oblast*), and local (such as a *hakimyat*) levels fear that “negative” reporting—even when accurate—makes them and the regimes look incompetent, insensitive, corrupt, ignorant, or otherwise failing in policies, leadership, and governing skills. Such reporting may anger politically powerful business interests, including government-controlled or joint ventures. Given the prospect of adverse governmental reaction, it is expected that some journalists who do tackle such stories feel compelled to shield their identities in their published reports. In fact, an editor’s note at the end of one *Eurasianet* story (Kusainov, 2003) candidly disclosed that “Aldar Kusainov is a Central Asia-based reporter who employs a pseudonym out of fear of government reprisals.”

In addition, salaried journalists at state-owned or state-controlled media may not want their employers to discover that they freelance for independent Web sites. Other factors that may induce journalists to disguise their identities through pseudonyms may include averting taxes and tax audits, as well as ethical constraints on moonlighting. The author’s 2004 survey of Uzbekistani journalists at training workshops found that twenty-four of fifty respondents sometimes report under a pseudonym.

Even use of a pseudonym does not ensure freedom from retaliation or sanctions. Joshua Machleder (2004) of *Internews,* said:

I think it’s almost like a whole series of rules that journalists who work in the region have and break in order to continue their work here. It is also because of the anonymity that publication on the Web affords them, though within Central Asia the authorities can figure out who the journalists are. In the end, it’s not really so hard. The authorities could follow the money (how payments are made to journalists); they could follow the representations of the news organizations; they can interrogate the people who are cited in interviews or subjects of the reports etc. to track down who they are.

Writers for *Eurasianet* have the option to use a pseudonym, and Burke (2004) said that “in one instance I wouldn’t allow an Uzbek writer to use his own name, as I
thought it foolhardy.” Officials have questioned Eurasianet contributors after their stories appeared. “This is especially the case in Tajikistan where, at first, writers were less afraid to use their own names. That has changed over time, and now many are reluctant to use their real names.”

IWPR’s Mukhametrahimova (2004) said the decision on pseudonym use involves editors at London headquarters, IWPR country editors in Central Asia, and the writers involved:

I will discuss why that is, what are the reasons for that? There are various reasons. We tend to go down the way of using pseudonyms rather than exposing our reporters to the unnecessary threat of danger. It’s a hard choice, either a pseudonym or no story. They choose to have a story.

Unlike the other two sites studied, IRIN News does not use bylines. Crowley (2003) said he is unsure of the reason for that policy “but I suspect for security reasons. Many of our journalists only write for IRIN on the understanding there are no bylines. Our stringer in Almaty was arrested while reporting on immigration law recently.”

Thus the hypothesis: Reporters who write about political, press, and speech rights issues for these sites frequently do so under pseudonyms.

**Method**

This study content analyzed all political, press, and speech rights stories that involved one or more of the republics and that were posted on the Eurasianet, IWPR, and IRIN News sites between 1 January and 31 December 2003. Question-and-answer articles that are essentially transcripts of interviews with a single source were excluded, as were articles labeled “commentary.” Articles involving other countries—usually neighboring countries—were included only if Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, or Kazakhstan was mentioned.

Political rights stories involve topics such as voting, organization of political parties, free and fair elections, and open government laws. Press rights stories involve such topics as censorship, self-censorship, harassment of the press, libel suits, governmental licensing, and prosecutions of journalists or writers. Speech rights stories relate to speech, publication, or dissemination of ideas and material by people who are not identified in the story as journalists or writers or as affiliated with a media organization. These three categories excluded stories in which the primary focus was gender or ethnic rights, human trafficking, religion, refugee or prisoner rights, and other human rights topics unless related directly to political, press, or speech rights.

The study incorporated documentary, interview and survey research, as well as the author’s observations as a Fulbright lecturer and as a professional journalism trainer in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.
Findings

For this study, 122 articles were relevant. Of them, 29 were posted on Eurasianet, 67 on IWPR, and 26 on IRIN News.

**RQ 1** asked what press, speech, and political rights issues these Web sites are most likely to cover. As Table 1 shows, political rights stories accounted for the largest proportion of relevant stories, followed by press rights stories. Speech rights stories made up less than 14 percent of the total. The discrepancy was largest in IRIN News coverage, where 18 of the 26 stories dealt with press rights.

**Table 1: Primary story topics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eurasianet</th>
<th>IWPR</th>
<th>IRIN</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press rights</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech rights</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political rights</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ 2** addressed the use of named and unnamed sources. As Table 2 shows, the articles cited 476 named elite sources such as academics, Central Asian government officials, domestic NGO representatives, political activists, representatives of foreign governments and agencies, journalists, and other experts. Together, government officials, political activists, and journalists made up almost six out of ten named sources. They also cited 17 “ordinary” people who were named in full but described with such labels as “teacher” or “one man from the Dashkhovuz region in northern Turkmenistan.” Central Asian government officials accounted for almost one-quarter of the named sources.

This dominance of elite named sources could be expected. First, these elites may feel they are not apt to suffer retaliation from government or other influential interests angry about their comments. In fact, the government officials cited were usually high ranking and presumably authorized to be interviewed. Second, elite sources may be more familiar with dealing with the press and have better access to journalists for these Web sites than other potential sources. Third, experienced journalists often know which sources are accessible, quotable, media-savvy, and credible—known qualities in an individual or institutional sense—rather than unknown, harder-to-find, and perhaps less articulate “ordinary” people.

**Table 2: Use of named sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Named Elite Sources</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political activist</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist, writer</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign NGO, government, agency</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for unnamed sources, they appeared in slightly more than one quarter (33) of the 122 relevant stories. Among the three Web sites, stories with at least one unnamed source were most likely (31.2 percent) to appear on IWPR and least common on IRIN News coverage (only one of 26 stories.) Among elite sources, representatives or officials of Central Asian governments and other experts each provided about 20 percent of the anonymous sources (see Table 3). “Ordinary” people accounted for one-third of the unnamed sources. One explanation is that such sources were more fearful of retribution or sanctions if quoted by name than were political activists, academics, and representatives of domestic NGOs and foreign entities. Another explanation is that the journalists were less willing to grant anonymity to sources other than government officials and “ordinary” people.

Table 3: Use of unnamed sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political activist</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist, writer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign NGO, government, agency</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic NGO</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other expert with or without affiliation given</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total elite sources</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ordinary” people</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total unnamed sources</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hypothesis predicted that reporters who write about press, speech and political rights for these sites often use pseudonyms. Eurasianet and IWPR disclose that fact at the end of their stories with such an explanation as “Ibragim Alibekov is the pseudonym for a Kazakhstani journalist” or “Azat Kakabaev is the pseudonym for a journalist in Turkmenistan.” With joint bylines, the first one listed determined whether a story was classified as written under a pseudonym. The hypothesis was supported (see Table 4).

After excluding IRIN News stories, none of which carry bylines as a matter of Web site policy, one-quarter of the remaining stories with bylines used pseudonyms. It
is also possible that editors decided not to put any name on some of the no-byline stories to preserve their reporters’ anonymity.

Table 4: Use of pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No byline</th>
<th>Real byline</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eurasianet</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWPR</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 96*</td>
<td>IRIN News stories do not carry bylines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

These three Western news Web sites carry the type of articles about important and controversial issues and events that domestic Central Asian media cannot carry because of governmental, cultural, and self-imposed restraints and because of a lack of resources. This is emphatically not to say that many Central Asian journalists lack the professional skills, acumen, or interest to report about and assess such issues with a multiplicity of views and with factual accuracy. After all, most of these stories were written by journalists from the five countries, regardless of where their readers are located.

When *Moya Stolitsa-Novisti* closed because it could not afford to pay libel or “moral damages” to government officials who sued the independent paper, the newspaper continued to maintain a Web site, “although in a country as poor as Kyrgyzstan, few will have access to this information” (Babakulov & Sagynbaeva, 2003). However, the spread of Internet access may increase opportunities for independent journalism, a fact that is recognized by foreign NGOs and other training funders. As the Internet becomes more widely accessible and affordable, the potential domestic audience for news Web sites will expand as well, particularly if they make all their stories available in Russian and in ethnic languages. If stories are republished or broadcast by ethnic language media, their scope of influence also stands to expand.

Meanwhile, journalists must learn how to make the most of that anticipated change. In 2004, the United Kingdom-based NGO Index on Censorship launched a Central Asia media development program with Web publishing training. It described Web publishing as an often under-used resource with such advantages as low-cost distribution and dissemination, both within Central Asia and beyond. Its training topics include design, legal issues, e-commerce, economics, and ways to avoid site-blocking.

The findings demonstrate that journalists reporting on issues such as press, speech, and political rights in the region—even contributors to foreign news organizations like these—remain under strict external constraints. That is evident through their use of pseudonyms and their difficulty in convincing sources in and out of government.
to allow their real names to be published. Some stories were both written under a pseudonym and cited anonymous sources.

From the position of policy and journalism practice, it is interesting to note how few stories used “ordinary” people as sources. Instead, the vast majority of both named and unnamed sources used by all three Web sites can be classified as elites in and out of government. The voices of non-elites – “ordinary” – sources were rarely heard, accounting for only 6.5 percent of the total 551 named and unnamed sources. While it is understandable that non-elites would not play a major role in stories about press rights, certainly much speech rights and political rights news has a direct impact on them. And although it is understandable that many “ordinary” people do not want to draw any media attention to themselves, journalists should ask themselves whether stories about core societal issues such as individual rights and democracy are of no concern to the lives and ideas of “ordinary” people. And would reporting on these issues resonate more among that potential audience if they could see themselves—as represented by surrogate villagers, teachers, shopkeepers, farmers, and students—mirrored in news coverage, especially when their own governments appear uninterested in their opinions?

There are other arenas for future research. For instance, if Kyrgyzstan continues on the road to a free, market-supported press, will that reduce the use of reporter pseudonyms and unidentified sources in stories posted on Western news Web sites and in the Kyrgyz media? Also, longitudinal studies could track trends in the types of coverage and the prevalence of reporter pseudonyms and unnamed sources. A further question is how these and similar Web sites and other foreign media outlets cover other Central Asian public policy issues and controversies, such as health and human services, gender, refugees, and economic development. Another question: How does independent Web news sites’ coverage of political, press, and speech rights issues contrast with coverage by large-circulation newspapers in Russian and ethnic languages? And as the Internet becomes better established in the region, how do users compare the credibility of these sites with the credibility of newspapers, television stations, and radio stations?

Finally, this type of study can be adapted to other regions—even beyond the former Soviet Union—where independent Western or multinational Web sites provide alternative news to that permitted in government-controlled or censored domestic media. The reports of the Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House and other organizations underscore that the media environment is troubling, even deadly, for journalists elsewhere. The findings of this article about Central Asia will provide data for comparative analysis.

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