The Ferghana Valley is the most politically and diplomatically volatile area in formerly Soviet Central Asia. More than merely a geographic convergence of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, it is a region where official borders disregard centuries of cultural and ethnic patterns of employment, trade, migration, kinship, and agriculture. Borders are porous and often unmarked, and some villages are “checkerboards of nationalities, with adjacent houses in different countries,” (Trilling, 2009). The Ferghana Valley, one expert observed, is the ‘strategic center of gravity’ of Central Asia – owing to its central geographic location, extremely fertile soil, dense population, strong religious influence, persistent instability, and lack of effective control by central authorities” (Donnelly, 2012: 8). News reports label it a “valley of contention,” “tinderbox for violence,” and a “zone of potential conflicts” where the strongest loyalties belong to family, ethnic group, and community – neither to the state nor to the regimes that govern from the distant capitals: Tashkent, Bishkek, and Dushanbe.

As Grieves (2012) observed, news does not stop at borders. Yet political, legal, extra-legal, and economic factors preclude in-depth and independent news coverage of transborder issues in the Ferghana Valley. Thus, as this article shows, news media in the region often fail to adequately trans-border issues and events on behalf of their audiences because of governmental constraints on news-gathering and news dissemination, self-censorship, and barriers to access to information.
Major transborder issues and conflicts include environmental perils; access to water; political rights and constraints; health risks such as H1N1; activities of Islamist organizations, cross-border legal and illicit trade; refugees; ethnic confrontations; corruption; visa requirements; and labor migration. Events in early 2013 provide samples of the range of such issues: For example, in January 2013, the predominantly ethnic Tajiks living in Sokh – an enclave belonging to Uzbekistan but surrounded by Kyrgyzstan – attacked Kyrgyz border guards and seized Kyrgyz hostages; in response, Uzbekistan unilaterally closed most border checkpoints, isolating seven Kyrgyz villages that became accessible only by helicopter (Trilling, 2013). In March 2013, EurasiaNet (Sadykov, 2013a) reported about concerns that Uzbekistan’s planned new railroad line will bypass Tajikistan’s part of the Ferghana Valley, costing that country $25 million in annual transit fees. These were, however, only two in a long chain of events that reflect uncertainties about national identity and political power, most notably Uzbekistan’s 1999-2000 partial closure of its Ferghana Valley border with Kyrgyzstan (Megoran, 2006).

Kyrgyzstan’s second-largest city, Osh in the Ferghana Valley, is called the region’s “drug capital” because so much Afghan heroin is smuggled across its laxly controlled, largely mountainous border with Tajikistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013). Smuggling extends to foodstuffs, fuel, appliances, and building materials. Widespread bribe-taking and corruption among poorly paid border guards exacerbate smuggling, narcotics trafficking, and the movement of illegal refugees.

There are serious security concerns in the Ferghana Valley, including a rise in reported terrorist activities since 2007. In large part, those concerns are rooted in the fact that the vast majority of residents in the valley are Muslim and ‘widely regarded as more devout’ than elsewhere in Central Asia and the rest of the former Soviet Union (Salmorbekova and Yemelianova, 2011: 213). That religious conservatism also plays a role in attitudes toward the press, especially as that conservatism grows as a cultural force in the region (Shafer and Freedman, 2009). As the chief editor for London-based Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Tajikistan said, “We don’t have nice government programs for youth and poverty. The government is very weak in working with the people. Religious and extremist groups are stronger and use this situation to appeal to the people because many extremist organizations use the youth. They can pay them” (Lola Olimova, personal communication, 24 May 2012).

Closely related is the potential impact on the region when US combat troops complete their withdrawal from nearby Afghanistan, now scheduled...
for 2014. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and another group classified by the three governments as terrorist, Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), advocate creation of an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia. An analysis by a US Army officer outlined three potential post-withdrawal scenarios: a “full-scale offensive” in the valley by the militant Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that topples the three governments; significant ungoverned space which would serve as a safe haven, breeding ground, and staging area for [violent extremist organizations] and militants”; or stability, in which violent extremist groups “with away, disband, or join in non-violent political processes.” The analysis concludes that the second option is most likely to occur (Donnelly, 2012: 9-10).

Water for agriculture and energy, particularly hydropower, remains a major cause of trilateral tension in the Ferghana Valley where the Soviet-era model of centralized administration and allocation of water resources was no longer feasible after independence (Wegerich et al., 2012). As Libert and Lipponen noted:

In Central Asia, the competition between water use for hydropower generation and for irrigation contributes to serious consequences for the economy of riparians in years with a deficit of water. It also raises the political tension between riparian countries. Hydropower generation is a priority for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the upstream countries, while the downstream countries are more dependent on irrigated agriculture (2012: 567).

A timely illustration is Uzbekistan’s resistance to Tajikistan’s hopes of completing the now-stalled, partly built Roghun hydroelectric project; that disagreement is reflected in Uzbekistan’s December 2012 interruption of natural gas supplies to Tajikistan (Bakhtiyor, 2013).

Two internal events in particular shape the attitudes of journalists in both countries, especially those in the Ferghana Valley. The first was the Tajikistan civil war that began in 1992, the year after independence, and continued until 1997, costing an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 lives.

The second, more recent was violence in the South of Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz two months after a coup forced authoritarian President Kurmanbek Bakiyev from office. Ethnic Uzbeks accounted for more than 80 percent of suspects arrested on violence-related charges in June 2010 although they made up more than 70 percent of the casualties (US Department of State, 2012). The nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Crisis Group (2012: 3) labeled the conflict
as a “pogrom” and reported that the “June events” – as local residents characterized it – left more than 420 people dead and displaced more than 400,000 others; another international NGO described it as “mayhem” (Human Rights Watch, 2010). Yet the existence of such tensions and the potential for violence was no surprise. Only weeks earlier, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) conducted media training seminars for journalists and human rights activists from the South. The focus was reporting on inter-ethnic and political issues; the workshops were intended ‘to strengthen accurate, unbiased and balanced reporting by both local journalists and human rights defenders’ (OSCE, 2010).

Ethnic disharmony also occurs on the Tajikistan side of the border, where minorities complain about discrimination. The coordinator of the Center of Culture of Uzbek Citizenship/Committee of Uzbek Nationalities in Khojand, said government statistics undercount ethnic Uzbeks: the 14 percent official figure is ‘really more than 30 percent’ nationally, while the official 20 percent figure in Sughd province is “unofficially” more than 40 percent (Yusupov I.Temirovich, personal communication, 21 May 2012).

Press and human rights advocacy groups, Western governments, and multinational agencies such as OSCE support media development in the region and frequently criticize the regimes for violating constitutional provisions for press freedom. For journalists, working in the Ferghana Valley poses special challenges that are even more severe than elsewhere in the three countries. For example, troops shot at reporter Galima Bukharbaeva and other journalists who were covering the military’s bloody suppression of the 2005 Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan; she and others fled into exile afterwards (Bukharbaeva, 2005). In 2007, independent journalist and human rights advocate Alisher Saipov, an ethnic Uzbek working in Kyrgyzstan, was assassinated in Osh; press rights defenders contend Saipov was killed by the Uzbek secret police (Imamova et al., 2008). Uzbekistani authorities detained a reporter for the Russian-language online news service Ferghana while he was filming the arrival of ethnic Uzbek refugees fleeing the June 2010 violence in the South of Kyrgyzstan; he was held for two and a half days (Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 2010).

Prior Research

A growing number of scholars in and beyond these countries are studying Central Asia’s press systems, both of those of individual countries and of the region. The most comprehensive, multi-disciplinary overview examines such topics as journalism education, professional and ethical standards,
government restraints, Internet regulation, ethnic media, ownership, coverage of terrorism, and international broadcasters (Freedman and Shafer, 2011). However, there is little published research about journalism specifically in the Ferghana Valley. One exception is Ferrando’s comparative study of the region’s ethnic news media – published in national languages and in Russian. In it, he noted, “Cross-border communication implicates the relationship between minority media and their kin state. Soviet borders were insignificant, so minority media circulated freely within their respective language group. Today each nation-state applies strict border controls” (Ferrando, 2011: 176). However, that study does not focus on press coverage of public policy issues obstacles to such coverage.

Method

In his study of transborder journalists in Europe’s Moselle Valley – France, Germany, and Luxembourg – Grieves (2012: 6) criticized “a significant shortcoming of international communication scholarship. Scholars have... largely neglected the perspectives of working journalists...” and advocated “permitting those actually involved in journalistic production to speak”. To understand a press system’s operations, scholars should go beyond official reports and statements to inquire of working journalists how they carry out their professional duties and what obstacles impair their ability to do so, including constraints on press freedom. Negative factors may include self-censorship, bribe-taking, conflicts of interest, a sense of patriotism or nationalism, threats, ethnic and political affiliations, and harassment. These all may impede the development and maintenance of public trust in the ethics and credibility of journalists and their media organizations. Interviews with on-the-ground media experts and journalism educators provide additional insights into the workings of the press systems.

This article is based in large part on twenty-nine in-depth interviews of journalists, journalism educators, and mass media experts in Bishkek and Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and in Dushanbe, and Khojand, Tajikistan. Those cities were selected because two are national capitals and the others are each country’s second-largest cities, both in the Ferghana Valley. Osh is the capital of Osh oblast; Khojand is capital of Sughd province. In addition, Osh was at the epicenter of Kyrgyzstan’s inter-ethnic violence in June 2010. Interview subjects were chosen because of their varied experience with a wide array of print, broadcast, and online media, including state, independent, and opposition news organizations, including international news organizations.
Interviews took place in May 2012 and were conducted in Russian with the assistance of a translator or in English. Most interviews lasted forty-five to ninety minutes. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form approved by the author’s university. They had the right to withhold their names from published studies and articles; two in Kyrgyzstan and five in Tajikistan chose that option. (Anonymous interviewees are cited in chronological order of their interviews, not in the order in which they appear in this article; not all seven are cited in the article.)

In addition to formal one-on-one interviews, the author conducted a roundtable discussion in Osh with nine young radio journalists at the bilingual Yntymak Public Radio. The US-based media development NGO Internews created the station, using a name that means “accord” or “harmony” in Uzbek and Kyrgyz. A television station is planned as well, according to the Internews country director (Mark Walsh, personal communication, 22 November 2012).

The author did not interview journalists in Uzbekistan’s capital or in the Fergana Valley because of the difficulty that Western scholars face in obtaining visas to conduct research relevant to human rights there. An anticipated follow-up study of journalists in Uzbekistan is planned and will incorporate Skype and email interviews.

In-depth interviews have been part of mass media research in the region. As examples, see studies of the press situation after Kyrgyzstan’s 2005 Tulip Revolution (Freedman, 2009a) and of environmental journalism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Freedman, 2009b). Wolf’s dissertation about newspaper coverage of Hizb-ut Tahrir incorporated interviews with Vicherniy Bishkek reporters who covered the outlawed Islamist organization (Wolf, 2011).

This article is also informed by reports and statements from international press rights and human rights organizations, from other civil society groups, from domestic and international media accounts, and from informal conversations with other experts.

Research Question

In light of political, economic, and cultural conditions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the two decades since they gained independence from the Soviet Union, what obstacles do journalists in those countries face in reporting about transborder issues in the Fergana Valley?
Overall Press Situation

To give perspective to Ferghana Valley news coverage, it is essential to recognize that all three countries have poor press rights records, with Uzbekistan regarded as one of the world’s most “repressitarian” (Freedman et al., 2010) regimes, meaning it is both repressive in human rights practices and authoritarian in governance; Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) ranked it 157th among 179 countries (Reporters sans Frontières) Uzbekistan state-run television has called Ferghana Valley journalists “scroungers” and accused them of blackmailing entrepreneurs (Sadykov, 2013b). Even Kyrgyzstan, whose 2010 revolution was depicted as a regime change that would more aggressively protect individual and political rights, receives low evaluations from international NGOs such as Freedom House, International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), and RSF. For example, Freedom House’s annual “Freedom of the Press” report rates its press system as “not free,” while the organization’s “Freedom on the Net” report places it 18th among 47 countries ranked. The 2012 IREX report on media sustainability in the region assesses Tajikistan’s press system as an “unsustainable mixed system.” A recent study (Freedman, 2013) identified current challenges to the press in Kyrgyzstan: legal and extra-legal constraints; lack of access to information and officials; opaque ownership and lack of economic sustainability; journalism skills and ethic; and the decline of Uzbek-language media.

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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reporters sans frontières</th>
<th>Freedom house</th>
<th>International research &amp; exchange board</th>
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<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>108 of 179</td>
<td>Not free</td>
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<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>122 of 179</td>
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<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>157 of 179</td>
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Highlighting the impact of low press freedom scores on civil society is the deep degree of actual and perceived corruption in the three countries. The 2012 Transparency International report on perceptions of public corruption
ranked Kyrgyzstan in the 13th among 154 countries; it scored twenty-four of 100 possible points on a scale where 0 means “perceived to be highly corrupt” and 100 means “perceived to be very clean.” Tajikistan tied for 157th place with a score of twenty-two, while Uzbekistan tied for 170th seventeen (Transparency International 2012). Beyond the statistics: as restricted as the press is in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, there is ample evidence to show how Uzbekistan’s even worst press rights environment impedes coverage of transborder issues in the valley. For example, during the January 2013 border confrontation in contested territory between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, estate-controlled Uzbek media outlets have remained largely silent,’ one international news agency noted (EurasiaNet, 2013).

Findings: Major Problems Confronting the Press

Based on the research, the most serious problems for journalists and news organizations in covering transborder issues fall into six categories:

Self-censorship

In Kyrgyzstan, journalists in the Ferghana Valley say their media environment is more imperilled, precarious, and vulnerable to outside influences than in the North because of the June 2010 ethnic violence. Even as local officials dispute allegations of a repressive media climate, press rights defenders and journalists cite the prevalence of self-censorship. To illustrate that point, journalists in the South acknowledge avoiding sensitive stories about ethnic relations lest government officials, leaders in either ethnic group, or the public at large blame the press if violence again erupts. One media lawyer was quoted as saying, ‘The sad reality is that journalists in southern Kyrgyzstan try to defend themselves by heavy self-censorship’ as was common during Soviet times. “Media people do not dare to write openly about their concerns, as they are low-paid and vulnerable” (Eurasia Net, 2013).

Similar admissions of self-censorship come from journalists in Tajikistan. For example, IWPR’s chief editor in Dushanbe said fear of a second civil war “is one of the reasons they don’t want to write about it... Most of them don’t want this conflict again”: (Olimova, personal communication, 24 May 2012). The editor-in-chief of the Dushanbe newspaper Farash, who also serves as chief of the Journalistic Center of Investigation, said, There’s a lot of pressure on journalists – warnings from the KGB, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other departments: “This can move to another civil war” (Niyozov Atoovulloevich, personal communication, 25 May 2012).
Avoidance of Controversy

Domestic media in particular fail to adequately cover a range of Ferghana Valley issues. A reporter in Dushanbe pointed to conflicts about citizenship, land disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and water disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Anonymous 1 Tajikistan, 21 May 2012). A Khojand reporter said, “There are a lot of dangerous topics in Sughd: HIV/AIDS, ecology, transportation, relations with Uzbekistan, immigration” (Usmon Usmonov, personal communication, 25 May 2012). A Dushanbe-based journalist for an Iranian radio news agency who freelances for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other media criticized shallow coverage of extremism. “We see newspapers and news agencies cover it but there is no deep analysis and no investigation – only opinion” (Kasim Bekmuhammad, personal communication, 28 May 2012). A Dushanbe-based editor-in-chief, who has been beaten with a baseball bat and whose newspaper was subjected to a tax audit, said it is difficult to do stories about drug trafficking across the border, as well as stories critical of the president and his relatives (Niyozov Atovulloevich, personal communication, 25 May 2012). Also poorly covered are major human rights problems, including domestic violence and women’s rights, the rights of labor migrants and youth, and freedom of religion and faith (Olimova, personal communication, 24 May 2012).

News organizations do not directly tackle the issue of ethnic tensions, perhaps from fear or because there is “no economic necessity to promote a multilingual society,” said a civil society NGO official. “It comes back to ownership: If the media depended on ratings, they would fight for each and every reader and each and every viewer” (Karakulova, personal communication, 14 May 2012). The coordinator of the Osh Media Resource Center observed. “It’s not popular to write about issues covering nationalities” (Pyatibratova, personal communication, 17 May 2012).

Coverage of the June 2010 ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan is illustrative. That crisis drew world headlines and directly affected the multi-ethnic population of all three countries in the Ferghana Valley: in Kyrgyzstan where the clashes occurred, and in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where refugees fled and many of whose citizens had family in the South of Kyrgyzstan. Foreign correspondents parachuted into the Ferghana Valley if they were allowed to, or reported from Bishkek, Dushanbe, or even Moscow. “Only international journalists could compare it and took information from other organizations,” said a Dushanbe journalist for an independent news agency (Nzaarali Pirnazrov, personal communication, 25 May 2012). Yet there was
nothing about it in the Tajikistani press, and information was available only from the Internet or satellite, according to the head of an Uzbek cultural organization in Tajikistan (Temirovich, personal communication, 21 May 2012). A journalist in Khojand said his newspaper did not have a reporter on site during the violence but published information from Kyrgyzstan and other media. Even that information was limited, the journalist continued: “Personally, we just published about the situation on the Tajikistan border, such as refugees arriving to stay with relatives” (Anonymous 3 Tajikistan, personal communication, 22 May 2012).

Reporting on controversies – when it occurs at all – may be one-sided and unbalanced. For example, a former reporter for television and an independent newspaper who now reports for international news organizations cites stories about the proposed Roghun hydroelectric dam that reflect only the government’s official perspective:

The press has been trying to write about it for the past two or three months. Of course it’s the position of Tajikistan that we’re trying to protect the policy of Tajikistan. If we took the other stand, the big people wouldn’t like it. They prefer the press write only about the interests of Tajikistan (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, 24 May 2012).

It may also be hazardous to a journalist’s wellbeing. In June 2011, a BBC correspondent who reports in the Ferghana Valley was arrested after writing about Hizb ut-Tahrir; the government falsely accused him of belonging to the outlawed organization. Authorities jailed and tortured him for a month before political intervention from the British government, BBC officials in London, and other foreign entities led to his release; he was acquitted at a rare open trial later in the year. “I have no sympathy for this group,” the correspondent said. “I was just doing my work. If I wrote about drug users, that doesn’t mean I’m a drug user” (Usmonov, personal communication, 25 May 2012).

**Lack of Access to Information**

The inability to obtain information from government agencies and officials in both countries creates barriers to reporting. A newspaper journalist with Osh Shamy (Candle of Osh) said, “Society is not open for giving interviews about the problems we have. . . There is a mentality in Osh: They care about the opinions and ideas of other people – what they’ll say about him.” In addition, bureaucratic procedures can be slow. For example, municipal
officials solicited for interviews about HIV/AIDS must call the mayor and Bishkek for permission to speak to the press. “It’s a long process and takes a lot of time” (Turgunbay Aldakunoy, personal communication, 18 May 2012). The coordinator of the Osh Media Resource Center complained that journalists receive a “porridge” or “mixture” of accurate and untrue information, especially after the June 2010 inter-ethnic violence (Alla Pyatibratova, personal communication, 17 May 2012).

As one journalist in Khojand put it, “Full information will not be reported by the government. It is trying to freeze this kind of information or ignore it. If I appear deeply interested in it, they could think I’m working for somebody else” (Anonymous 1 Tajikistan, personal communication, 21 May 2012). Obstacles to access impede coverage of corruption as well; the exception is when the government announces arrests “because the journalists have no possibility of getting the facts about the situation” and thus become vulnerable to defamation suits. “When journalists write about government officials, they accuse the journalists of not having the facts” (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, 24 May 2012). That’s a real reason to worry, as illuminated by a 25 February 2013 libel verdict after a closed-door civil trial. A court ordered the independent Imrouz News to pay US $10,500 to a government official’s son who had been jailed in Russia on drug charges but later acquitted on appeal; the article stated that the incident created diplomatic tensions (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2013).

If anything, access to information has become more restrictive in Tajikistan, where President Emomalii Rahmon used to require his ministers to hold monthly press conferences, but now requires them only quarterly. Even then, the officials often spend the full hour reading a report and deliberately don’t invite – or “forget” to invite – journalists from independent news outlets (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, 24 May 2012).

**Limited Collaboration**

There is little collaboration across borders, at least among most journalists who report for domestic media outlets. International news organizations have an advantage because they have staff, freelancers, and correspondents in both countries – and may have freelancers or stringers in Uzbekistan as well. Even for them, however, cooperation with colleagues outside the organization may be informal and episodic. The Farash editor-in-chief discussed when his newspaper worked with IWPR in Bishkek for a joint
article about transportation in Isfara, a Ferghana Valley city just across the Tajikistan border from Kyrgyzstan. He said IWPR sometimes requests coverage by his newspaper, such as interviewing a leader of the military opposition (Atovulloevich, personal communication, 25 May 2012). The IWPR chief editor in Dushanbe commented, “Our mass media cam work together only with support of donors, not by themselves,” and the situation is complicated by visa requirements and finances (Olimova, personal communication, 24 May 2012).

**Inadequate Professional Skills**

Interviewees in both countries criticized a low level of professional skills among journalists that impairs their ability to report in a fair, balanced, and accurate manner and to build and sustain public trust. A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty editor in Kyrgyzstan pointed to “a lack of qualified journalists on the ground,” with the exception of those working for international news organizations such as his and the BBC. “Even state TV channels, when they do report on these [controversial] issues have very loose reporting.” He attributed the acceptability of bribes to low salaries, saying journalists at regional media outlets may earn only US $100 – $150 a month and in Bishkek US $300-$500 a month, “depending on professional level,” although international news organizations pay more (Tolkun Umaraliev, personal communication, 14 May 2012). The director of the Osh Media Resource Center said that when a press outlet hires new journalists, “the organization has no editing rules or specific policies to follow... Here they’re told where to go, who to meet, what to write, the results in advance” (Maksuda Aitieva, personal communication, 15 May 2012).

As for journalism students – future professionals – the most motivated and talented often prefer jobs in public relations or with international NGOs rather than news organizations because of inadequate opportunities and salaries at local media outlets (Gulnura Toralieva, personal communication, 15 May 2012). One journalist in the South of Kyrgyzstan bluntly said of journalism careers: “Young people don’t want it,” citing salaries that are too low to support a family and the possibility of physical assault or death (Anonymous 1 Kyrgyzstan, personal communication, 16 May 2012). Yet a more optimistic young reporter at Yntymak Radio in Osh said, “Every journalist has to have a dream to be in a higher position, to grow in the job” (Roundtable, personal communication, 17 May 2012).

Similarly in Tajikistan, a journalist in Khojand said that “young journalists cannot collect different information from different places and
occupations and combine it and reach one conclusion. Old journalists have only one way of thinking that the Soviet Union left for them, that mentality, the old analysis as in Soviet times” (Anonymous 1 Tajikistan, personal communication, 21 May 2012).

Another interviewee said new graduates are unqualified because their instructors are unqualified and use out-of-date teaching materials. Young journalists, he continued, “don’t use more sources. There is no balancing of information. It’s mostly emotionally expressing opinions in articles. They don’t check the facts” (Anonymous 3 Tajikistan, personal communication, 22 May 2012). One who reports for international news organizations said bluntly, “The level of professionalism is not high in all the countries [in the Ferghana Valley]. They can’t analyze the situation” (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, 24 May 2012). The head of the journalism faculty at Khojand State University said the biggest challenge is a lack of teaching materials, computers and library books, especially material in Tajik rather than Russian; even so, some talented students find jobs in their second year (Zikriyagva Muhiba Abbasovna, personal communication, 22 May 2012).

**Weakened Minority-language Media**

The interethnic violence of 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan remains one a destructive impediment to development of independent and reliable mass media and to coverage of news in the Ferghana Valley. In addition to seizure of Osh’s two Uzbek-language television stations during the administration of interim President Roza Otunbayeva (7 April 2010-December 1, 2011), many ethnic Uzbek journalists moved from the South to Bishkek or left the country. Between the 2011 presidential election and winner Almazbek Atambayev taking office, the displaced owners of those two Uzbek-language stations were convicted in absentia on contrived charges of stirring up ethnic tensions. Dzhavlon Mirzakhodzhayev of Mezon TV and Khalil Khudaiberdiyev of Osh TV chose self-exile rather than face long prison terms (International Freedom of Expression Exchange 2011).

Ethnic Kyrgyz also took over two Uzbek-language newspapers. Uzbek-language media were completely wiped out of the media landscape, with only one 1,000-circulation newspaper left in the South, but it is state-funded and “on the brink of survival,” according to a civil society NGO official. “Television is even worse” (Elina Karakulova, personal communication, 14 May 2012). EurasiaNet (2012) reported that three municipalities in the South publish Uzbek-language weekly newspapers, all with low circulation; it also characterized the bilingual Yntymak Radio as “perhaps the brightest hope for an Uzbek-language revival in mass media.”
The small amount of media published or broadcast in non-national minority languages of the ethnically diverse Ferghana Valley is not limited to Kyrgyzstan. In Sughd Province, for example, Temirovich (personal communication, 21 May 2012) said that aside from a 40-minute news show two or three times monthly, “we do not have any TV shows in the Uzbek language,” although local residents with satellite dishes can watch programming from stations in Uzbekistan.

Improving Transborder Reporting

This web of factors-legal, extra-legal, economic, cultural, political, and geographic—contributes to inadequate coverage of transborder issues in the Ferghana Valley. Cross-border collaboration may provide one way to ease some of the burdens that domestic journalists face in collecting full and accurate information, even if their news organizations ultimately choose not to print, broadcast, or post their stories.

Of course, international news organizations with correspondents, stringers, staff and freelancers in two or three of the countries—such as Internews, IWPR, Itar-Tass, and EurasiaNet—already can and do cooperate internally among their own staff, freelancers, and correspondents to cover transborder issues. However, there are collaborative models elsewhere in the world, including ones that involve journalists and domestic media organizations in former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact nations.

One is the Baltic Center for Investigative Reporting, which describes its mission as “in-depth investigations of socially important issues in its region, such as corruption, crime, finances, entrepreneurship, health, and human rights. Our journalism encourages transparency and reform.” Among its aims are cross-border investigations, analysis of foreign perceptions of the three countries, use of computer-assisted journalism techniques, and information exchanges among regional and European Union journalists (Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism, 2011). The European Fund for Investigative Journalism, Belgium’s Pascal Decroos Fund, and the Danish NGO International Media Support cooperated with journalists in Moldova and Romania to investigate the “grey zone” of Moldovan applicants for Romanian citizenship after Romania joined the European Union (Journalismfund.edu, 2012a). Similarly, journalists in Slovenia, Finland, Bosnia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Ukraine, and Poland worked together to investigate illegal arms trafficking in the Balkans (Journalismfund.org, 2011b).
Danish journalist Brigitte Alfter said European journalists need to collaborate across borders “because we have so many different languages along with a partially federal political system.” In addition, “the cross-border connections, networks, and cooperation are considered a kind of insurance.” As an example she said participants “coordinate publication, so they research together and publish in the country where it is least dangerous; then – a day or so later – they ‘quote’ the colleague from the other country. Quoting is considered less dangerous than researching yourself” (Brigitte Alfter, personal communication, 14 February 2013).

Certainly the European situation differs from that of Central Asia although Europe has several countries considered only partly free or not free, crossing borders is hassle-free on most of the continent, news organizations generally have more financial resources, and press rights defenders usually have more political and societal influence than their Central Asian counterparts.

Conclusions

In authoritarian and post-authoritarian countries like those sharing the Ferghana Valley, the press holds the potential to serve as a foundational institution in a future democratic society with transparent governance and effective means for public participation and safeguarding of individual and political rights. As Relly (2010) put it:

Democratic theory suggests that a free news media and access to public information are associated with an informed electorate in what ultimately constitutes a feedback loop to government... This model is based on the assumption that citizens will access government-held information on their own or through news media monitoring and ultimately hold government accountable through free and fair elections.

Implementing such a model needs a press system and governmental and civil society institutions committed to guaranteeing that journalists have access information about topics of public import, that they practice ethically, that they use their professional skills responsibly, and that they are shielded from retribution, violence, punishment, and harassment.

In the Ferghana Valley, problems such as security, natural resources, trade, ethnicity, energy, refugees, and human rights clearly are not constrained by national boundaries drawn on a map. Thus for the public, the press also holds the potential to illuminate problems and challenges that are common to the transborder region and to explore and explain possible strategies to resolve them – drawing on news sources in more than one of the countries.
Writing about international media coverage of ethnic conflicts, Esenov discussed the importance of such coverage and the possibility that biased news media may encourage violence, as some analysts say occurred in the June 2010 conflict in Kyrgyzstan. For example: “By offering the broad public information on this subject, the media not only inform people, but also generate mass ideas and moods with respect to ethnic relations. This makes the way the media presents and interprets the ethnic life of different peoples extremely important” (Esenov, 2012: 7). He cited a study of newspaper coverage in Kyrgyzstan during the 2010 conflict by a scholar who concluded that many articles about ethnic issues published in that period “were of an outraged and accusatory nature with respect to a particular ethnicity and so promoted aggravation of the conflict” (Esenov, 2012: 8). The month before the June 2010 clashes, an OSCE media trainer observed, “Coverage of recent events in the [S]outh has resulted in some poor or even potentially harmful reporting. Some media and human rights activists have significantly departed from international reporting standards” (OSCE, 2010).

In an interview after his conviction in absentia, the self-exiled ex-owner of Osh TV discussed the ethnic situation in terms of media professionalism. He said a growth in nationalism during the Bakiyev regime had escalated after the uprising, including “pogroms” against ethnic Kurds and Turks in villages near Bishkek in spring 2010. He continued:

It was during this time that rumors of interethnic strife started to disseminate in southern Kyrgyzstan where Bakiyev initially fled after the coup. Osh TV journalists went to investigate those reports, and found that local small-scale conflicts happening at the time were about access to power, not ethnicity of the residents. But the post-coup tensions continued to stir rumors of ethnic violence.

Realizing the role and influence news media had, we, the journalists, tried to defuse those rumors by calling the developments by their real names. And when we learned of a May 2010 protest rally in Jalal-Abad, led by Kadyrzhan Batyrov, an informal leader of the ethnic Uzbek community, and Bektur Asanov, regional governor and ethnic Kyrgyz, we immediately decided to broadcast it. We understood that cohosting of the rally by the leaders of two ethnic groups was good material for neutralizing those rumors, and we aired it. We continued our broadcasts – five news reports a day – until June 11, 2010, the day the conflict started, and the day when the Osh mayor, Melis Myrzakmatov, ordered us to cease broadcasting (Suleymanov, 2011).
Journals in these countries acknowledge the adverse consequences of such socio-political environments on their press systems and professional obligations. They acknowledge their inability to adequately and truthfully cover serious public policy issues, including transborder issues in the Ferghana Valley. “My material will not be all truth. It will be half-truth. The information will be provided by local people who will give me the full information but I will be afraid to print it,” one reporter in Khojand said. “I will do my article and provide it to my boss, and my boss will decide how much of it will be shown” (Anonymous 2 Tajikistan, personal communication, 21 May 2012). And they acknowledge that such distortions, omissions, and inability to report accurately about policy controversies and events preclude public confidence in the integrity and credibility of the press. Asked whether people believe the news they read, hear, or watch on television, the same reporter bluntly responded, “Absolutely not” (Anonymous 2 Tajikistan, personal communication, 21 May 2012).

These findings have implications for practicing and prospective journalists and for media development in Central Asia, as well as for press and human rights advocacy and civil society advancement in this strategic world region. Beyond that, the findings are relevant to identifying and addressing problems that confront journalists elsewhere in the world who seek to report accurately, objectively, and in a balanced way about transborder issues, especially where those issues involve authoritarian countries. The five major problems synthesized from these interviews – self-censorship, avoidance of controversy, access to information, little collaboration, inadequate professional skills, and weakened minority-language media – may create a paradigm useful for examining other conflicted border areas of the world, such as Kashmir on the India-Pakistan border.

Grieves wrote that individual journalists “even though rooted in national traditions of journalism, [can] venture out on their own to build journalistic connections across boundaries. These individuals must chart their own course in determining where the boundaries of border-transcending journalism lie – in philosophical as well as organizational terms” (2012: 177).

Given the wide array of legal, financial, and operational restrictions in Central Asia, it takes great courage, commitment, and resourcefulness for individual journalists there to venture out to build connections and to chart their own course. To do so does not mean that transnational journalism requires uniformity in content, style, sourcing, or means of dissemination, especially in a region where authoritarian leaders strive to develop a sense of
national identity and statehood in what remain relatively young independent countries. Grieves cautioned that it is unrealistic and possibly undesirable to expect that the “distinctive features of the different journalisms – shaped by national cultures and systems – that one encounters around the globe…” will disappear. “[B]order-transcending journalism coexists with ‘national’ journalism, but… the relationship is an uneasy coexistence and is fraught with contradictions” (2012:3).

References


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