Self-censorship among journalists is still rampant. Preferential treatment is still given to the state controlled media. The tendency to commercialize the mass media also continued in 2008. With increasing pressure from the authorities the free mass media companies prefer not to touch public-political subjects and choose to develop entertainment content instead.



The past year brought about some modest changes in Kyrgyzstan in regards to media freedom. On April 24, 2008, a new law protecting the freedom of speech was enacted. Panelists fear that this law will simply be a symptom of the approaching toughening of the authorities' relationship to the mass media, although the Kyrgyz media legislation still remains the most liberal in the region. There have been an increasing number of cases of violence against journalists recently. This trend has been noted in the reports of a number of international organizations. Finally, the NGO presence within the country has weakened as there are few media organizations left and the others have started working in the methodological sphere instead of serving the interests of the mass media and publications.

Other problems of the past persist. Self-censorship among journalists is still rampant. Preferential treatment is still given to the state controlled media. The tendency to commercialize the mass media also continued in 2008. With increasing pressure from the authorities the free mass media companies prefer not to touch public-political subjects and choose to develop entertainment content instead. Finally, the mass media are still decades behind in technical terms. Most printed publications have a single computer and regional newspapers rarely have any functioning equipment.

The overall score increased slightly compared to last year, from 1.78 to 1.93. The freedom of speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, and supporting institutions objectives all increased modestly. The business management objective is the only one that is down from last year and this is due mainly to the tightening control the state is exerting over independent distribution and advertising channels.

# KYRGYZSTAN AT A GLANCE

#### **GENERAL**

- > Population: 5,356,869 (July 2008 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > Capital city: Bishkek
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uygur 1%, other 5.7% (1999 census, CIA World Factbook)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (CIA World Factbook)
- > Languages (% of population): Kyrgyz 64.7% (official), Uzbek 13.6%, Russian 12.5% (official), Dungun 1%, other 8.2% (1999 census, CIA World Factbook)
- > GNI (2007-Atlas): \$3.099 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > GNI per capita (2007-PPP): \$1,950 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > Literacy rate: 98.7% (male 99.3%, female 98.1%) (1999 census., CIA
- > President or top authority: President Kurmanbek Bakiev (since August 14, 2005)

#### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print: 4 main dailies, 4 other main papers, 250 total; Radio: 6 main stations, 31 others; Television Stations: 7 main stations, 3 local cable networks
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: Top four by circulation: Super Info (Circulation: 80,000, private, Kyrgyz language), Vechernij Bishkek (Circulation: 50,000, private, Russian language), Pyramid (Circulation 40,000, private, Russian language), Delo (22,000, private, Russian language)
- > Broadcast ratings: Top two: National TV and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (state-owned, both languages), 5th Channel (private, both languages)
- > News agencies: Kabar (state-owned), AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), Zamandashpress
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: \$5 million in 2008
- >Internet usage: 750,000 (2007 est., CIA World Factbook)

# SUSTAINABILITY UNSUSSAINABLE UNSUSSAINABLE UNSUSSAINABLE UNEDSTAINABILITY SUSSAINABLE UNEDSTAINABLE SUSSAINABLE SU

Annual scores for 2002 through 2005 are available online at http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI\_EUR/archive.asp

#### Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

# Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

**Sustainable (3-4):** Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

#### **OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

#### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.02

The most important principle for protecting freedom of speech, namely, prohibiting censorship, was omitted from the new version of the Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic issued in October 2007. Experts said the consequences would be felt quickly and on June 3, 2008 President Bakiev signed a television and radio broadcasting law that was rashly approved by the country's Parliament on April 24. According to experts, the law questioned the existence of television companies in the country on the eve of transferring to digital broadcasting. The law forces some of them to re-broadcast Russian and Kazakh television and radio companies or they will be shut down because the law's requirements cannot be practically adhered to by all the electronic mass media. Article 8 of this law provides that over one half of total broadcasting time should be in the official language for every television and radio organization in the country. It also states that at least 50 percent of broadcasts should be of their own production and, at least 60 percent should be nationally produced. Khalilzhan Khudaiberdiev, director of the Osh Television and Radio Company, said that "this condition is difficult to implement, as such volumes of audio and visual output do not exist. I have only 42 hours of programs in the state language in the company. We will exhaust the entire collection in four days and then we will have to repeat it to adhere to the law." Only the National Television and Radio Company Government channel and the channels that can make large investments can meet these conditions. For regional television and radio companies, this law could kill them off, considering the media market and the limited possibilities and sources to develop this market.

Andre Miasarov of the Mass Media Support Center said, "The new version of the Constitution does not prohibit censorship, as it would break the fundamental principle - to not approve laws limiting freedom of speech. As a result, the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting was approved; writs worth millions have been issued against the printed mass media; the chief-editor of the Alibi newspaper has been detained and other things have happened." Besides the crippling terms for television companies the law has become a milestone in strengthening authoritarian powers. According to Article 11 of the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, the Law on the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation (NTRBC) has been abolished as it contained a mechanism for civil control of television. It assumed the NTRBC would be granted the status of public television but the new law buried the idea of independent public television in Kyrgyzstan. According to media experts, the law is dangerously vague

in its wording and in practice it may allow the courts to interpret it to favor the interests of certain persons and groups. This is only one example. Article 6 has provisions for revoking an electronic mass media company's license in the event of "abusing the free activities of television and radio broadcasting organizations." "Showing gratuitous violence" is mentioned among other items of possible abuse. In this connection, the borders of validity and groundlessness are unclear and undetermined and the term "violence" is not explained in the law.

The discontent actively expressed by the community, including media organizations and NGOs, forced President Bakiev to sign the law with a provision to make corrections and revisions "taking into account the community's opinion." The Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ministry of Justice is obliged to work out new corrections and revisions and it has invited key experts from the media to do so. However, so far in 2009, there have been no proposals for changes and additions. Because of this, the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting is in force but television and radio companies are in no hurry to implement the law's requirements.

The director of Osh Television asked the Constitutional Court of the Kyrgyz Republic to cancel the discriminatory provisions in Article 20 of the Law on Television that forces an obligatory 50 percent of broadcasts to be in the official language. However, the case was rejected. In all fairness, some positive standards set by the new law should be mentioned, such as the legal requirement to work out editorial policies for the mass media and the establishment of a supervisory board.

In general, however, according to panel participants, the new law is a symptom of the approaching toughening of the authorities' relationship to the mass media, although the Kyrgyz media legislation still remains the most liberal in the region. According to the media ombudsman Ilim Karypbekov, "There are adequate legal standards and mechanisms for protecting freedom of speech but their implementation in practice is complicated. The valuation approach by judges and other media businesses makes it possible to apply a wide variety of sanctions and punishments. As a result, courts make decisions to collect amounts varying from one to several million soms."

Besides the new law on television and radio broadcasting, there are a number of special laws in the media sector that have to provide freedom of speech in the country, including: The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on the Mass Media issued on May 8th 1993, the Law on Guarantees and Freedom of Access to Information, the Law on Access to Information that Belongs to Government Structures and Local

Self-Governments in the Kyrgyz Republic (both documents were issued on December 28th 2006), the Law on Protecting State Secrets approved on April 14th 1994, the Resolution of the Plenary Session of the Supreme Court of the Kyrgyz Republic approved on December 5th 2003, the Court Practices to Resolve Disputes on Protecting Honor, Dignity, and Business Reputation among others.

Members of Parliament (MPs), government officials and civil society representatives have been seriously involved in revising and improving the media legislation. One MP has been busy trying to elaborate and submit a draft law that would allow the state to regulate the Internet, as this information zone is free from government intervention. Draft laws are being created on publishing activities and the new publication of the Law on the Mass Media is currently being written, but they have not yet come to fruition. Panelist Marat Tokoev noted, "Previously, the authorities fought the mass media without changing the legislation but they now understand that they should change the rules to suit themselves. A striking example of this includes a new law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, as well as their attempts to include the Internet to the mass media sector. As a result, the quality of the media legislation has drastically reduced." Alexander Kulinskiy of the Press Complaints Commission says that "in fact, Article 41\1 of the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting introduces censorship of television because it says that the person who submits information has a right to watch or listen to a broadcast before it is broadcast. Previously, the legislation had a provision

# LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

allowing preliminary concordance but this article, in fact, has introduced censorship when taking into consideration our political situation. Basically, concordance and review are undoubtedly different things."

In spite of the laws limiting access to information being strengthened, it is still possible to gain access in practice through the courts. In particular, the Media Representative Institute won more than 10 court cases forcing officials to grant access to information. Expanding access to information is also the task of a series of human rights activists and their organizations. The leader of the Chui Area Local Self-government, Ayil Okmotu, was fined in 2008 after human rights activist Maxim Kuleshov took him to court for not providing information according to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, on Access to Information that Belongs to Government Structures and Local Self-governments in the Kyrgyz Republic.

The panelists' assessments of this issue were divided. Some think the situation with licensing has been poor for many years and last year changed nothing. Others think the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting introduced additional difficulties into an already non-transparent and non-systematic process, making it worse. Television and radio companies will have to get three licenses each covering broadcasting, content and production but there is no provision in the law as to who will issue these licenses and to whom. At the end of the year, there was a meeting of the licensing committee and a number of companies received their frequencies. Ernis Mamyrkanov, a panelist involved in the process that distributes frequencies, said that there is no clear information on available frequencies, the number of applicants who are waiting for frequencies, or how long they should wait and the criteria for decision-making. Panelists noted that a number of television and radio companies have not been able to get frequencies for many years (for example, Europe Plus has already been on the waiting list for eight years), whereas some newly formed television and radio companies get them with no delay. Two Chinese television channels received digital frequencies and the right to broadcast countrywide in 2008 and E1TR received 30 frequencies at once last year. Kubat Otorbaev of Azattyk Media affirms that the licensing process is not transparent in Kyrgyzstan. Neither ordinary people nor interested parties including journalists are told how and when licenses for frequencies are issued. Some companies and people receive the right to frequencies immediately, whilst others have been waiting for years. For example, Almaz Naryn Radio in Naryn Province has been asking for a frequency in the At-Bashy, Ak-Talin, and Kochkor areas for a long time but so far without success."

To some the situation with frequency distribution is similar to shuffling a deck of cards. In particular, a digital frequency was given away in 2008 in Kyzyl-Kiya, Batken Region, but OshTV had already been broadcasting on this 23rd frequency for 10 years. Naturally, OshTV started experiencing interference and as a result of the Company's application to the National Communications Agency, an official response was received that the new transmitter was temporarily disconnected on the 23rd frequency and aerials would be re-directed. The Director of OshTV, Khalilzhan Khudaiberdiev, stressed, "Nowhere else in the world would not only the same frequency but also adjacent channels be given away, as this breaks elementary technical regulations. In the meantime, three years ago the Mass Media Association in partnership with the Communications Agency drew up draft competitive conditions for giving away frequencies. The fate of this project is so far undecided."

However, Ilim Karypbekov noted that as no media outlet applied to the Media Representative Institute for support there were no court proceedings on issues related to the non-transparent and non-objective distribution of frequencies. In general, the law covering licensing has not been developed and this is alarming due to the forthcoming transition to digital broadcasting by 2014. Who will own the digital frequencies and who will distribute them and how will this be done? These and other questions should be solved urgently.

In October 2008, a new Tax Code came into force. The media sector still has no inherent benefits compared to other types of businesses.¹ Yet the tax system has become even more advantageous to the mass media than before, as the tax on advertising was abolished and some other types of taxation have been reduced. According to the panelists, conditions for entering the media market are still unequal. Socio-political publications cannot be registered in the Ministry of Justice for various reasons and people attempting to set up electronic mass media outlets cannot get a frequency or license. Kulinskiy testified that he personally could not register his newspaper in the summer of 2008 and 60 other people who submitted their documents to register at the same time were refused.

Also, there is no equality in the process and conditions for functioning mass media as legal entities. The mass media are vulnerable to censorship and dependent on distribution channels that are concentrated in the state's hands. Only completely commercial media outlets that do not touch socio-political problems or the mass media affiliated to key power structures and groups can become efficient businesses.

International organizations have noticed a rise in the cases of intimidation of the mass media "working in an atmosphere of increased persecution by the authorities, violence and lawlessness," the report of the Committee to Protect Journalists<sup>2</sup> reports. The past year was relatively calm and peaceful. There was no mass picketing, meetings, or other forms of disorder such as in the preceding year when many journalists were attacked by crowds, the armed forces and policemen. Nevertheless, the panelists noted that journalists were still being attacked. During panel discussions, five cases were reported of journalists being attacked and beaten, mainly by government officials. A. Kulinskiy said that while filming a fire at the Dordoi Market a television reporter from the Mir (World/Peace) Company was beaten up by some people in the presence of the Minister of Interior Affairs who showed no interest in what happened. To be fair, there are no reliable statistics on crimes against journalists in the country, nor have any media monitored the situation in 2008 or registered crimes against journalists.

The Bishkek Press Club (BPC) and Journalists Public Association has drawn up training manuals on how journalists should act in critical situations, taking into consideration the difficulties of the journalist's profession for whom mass disorder, meetings and other events are their workplace.

Investigations into crimes against journalists are delayed for years and, as a rule, society never hears details of such crimes. For example, there is still no information about the results of the investigation into the murder of the journalist Alisher Saipov. The general public, as a rule, are indifferent to such crimes.

There have been a lot of court cases involving the mass media where the government has been trying to increase its influence in the policy of non-government and independent publications. Private and government mass media do not have equal rights. To be more exact, there is inequality between mass media outlets that support the government and those that do not. Those "friendly" towards the

There have been an increasing number of cases of violence against journalists recently. This trend has been noted in the reports of a number of international organizations. In February 2008, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Freedom House expressed their fears regarding the human rights situation in Central Asia generally and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. In the freedom rating of the mass media compiled by Reporters without Borders, Kyrgyzstan is in 110th place, whereas Tajikistan is 115th, Kazakhstan is 125th and Uzbekistan is 160th.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Tax advantages and preferences cannot be applied in favor of state producers under the Facilitating Protocol signed on joining the WTO

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 2}$  G. Toralieva. Mass Media Development in Kyrgyzstan—trends in 2008  $\mbox{\sc Www.bpc.kg}$  22.09.2008

government include not only all government mass media like SK, KT, and NTRBC, but also a number of private mass media affiliated with the authorities including Channel 5, the *Vecherniy Bishkek* and *MSN* newspapers and others. The inequality in the system is in the form of built in preferences to the "friendly" mass media. Panelist Antonina Blindina of the *Chuiskie Novosti* newspaper goes as far to say, "I have a feeling that the state has a policy to destroy all newspaper editorial offices in spite of the fact they are government ones. The mass media in the regions are suffering."

The tradition of compulsory subscriptions still favors the government-supported newspapers and the government takes an active role in skewing advertisements towards these outlets. For example, all official institutions in society make their announcements and advertise in *Slovo Kyrgyzstan* and *Kyrgyz Tuusu. Vecherniy Bishkek* has been proclaimed a publication that has a "natural monopoly on advertising."

The budget grants reliable subsidies to a number of "friendly" government mass media outlets. Although at least a third of the government outlets break the budget laws and editors speak of their distress, nevertheless, budget funds are their basic revenue. In 2008, for example, a mobile satellite television station was bought for the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation for over \$500,000 from non-budget funds of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, while the majority of the regional mass media remained at the mercy of local authorities that are not going to financially support these mass media.3 As a result, the majority of the regional mass media "have one foot in the grave." Panelist Khalilzhan Khudaiberdiev said, "The law contains double standards. NTRBC is in an exclusive legal position. This TV channel is subsidized from our taxes but we cannot elect our representatives onto the supervisory board. We have no other ways to influence them, although we pay for the NTRBC as we do the army, police and so on. Discriminatory competitive conditions exist due to our taxes."

Tax levels also vary according to how close the mass media outlets are to the government. Government mass media outlets are exempt from a whole range of taxes including road and emergencies taxes. They pay less VAT due to the fact that pulling money from one government organization to another one is an irrational waste of funds. The majority of the private mass media, naturally, have no such indulgences.

The state provides variable access to information for various outlets. Opposition and other "unfriendly" mass media do not get information or they get it late. If the president or prime minister go on business trips they usually take two or three journalists with them. The list invariably includes Channel 5 and NTRBC and if Channel 5 invites MPs to its broadcast, the Press Service of the President's Administration will provide a hero's welcome.

In autumn 2008, a law on social partnership was approved, and most likely, the mass media will receive investments from this initiative in the near future. The majority of the media community is certain that competition for getting social orders will become a way of pressuring non-governmental outlets and giving further preferential treatment to government ones.

According to criminal case statistics, journalists' accusations of libel were not often considered in court in 2008. The panelists noted isolated instances when journalists were charged under such articles, as "libel" and "insulting honor and dignity," but in all cases journalists "had a lucky escape."

The conditions changed dramatically in well-publicized cases against the mass media, such as those against the De-facto and Alibi newspapers. Cholpon Orozobekova, the Chief Editor of the De-facto opposition newspaper, was charged under the Criminal Code for "Deliberately Spreading False Information." Her office was searched and a criminal case filed. The chief editor of the Alibi newspaper was imprisoned for a day "for not implementing a court's decision." Media experts clarified that unlike the Criminal Code's articles on libel and insulting honor and dignity, under civil law only the courts can order searches and other procedures. Such articles as "deliberately spreading false information" and "not implementing court decisions" fall under civil law. They empower investigators and the police to independently decide on searching a house, building, office etc. At present, the criminal case against Orozbekova is in abeyance because she has disappeared and is being sought as a criminal.

Panelists noted with alarm that the pressure on courts to apply the precedents of the above-mentioned Articles of the Criminal Code could be disastrous and the beginning of the end of the freedom of speech in Kyrgyzstan. Panelist Uson Kasybekov, an independent journalist, noted that "the whole problem stems from the fact that the presumption of innocence only applies in theory and in practice an accused should prove his or her innocence and the investigating agencies don't have to prove the guilt of the accused."

In July 2008, revisions to the Administrative Code that strengthened the right of access to socially significant information were approved. However, practice lags seriously

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> All regional TV and Radio Broadcasting companies owe huge sums of money to power companies and communal services and don't pay their employees their salaries every month and don't have any way of updating let alone repairing outdated equipment. In 2008 they, complete with their outstanding debts, were transferred to the balance sheet of the Communications Ministry. Most regional newspapers have long since given up any hope of getting any money from the budget although they are completely enslaved politically

behind the legislation. Journalists noticed a worsening in this sector because even traditionally "transparent" government structures like the Parliament have become more closed. In spite of the fact that every agency has a press service, journalists cannot always obtain information. The president did not give any public interviews to national or foreign mass media outlets; the speaker of parliament was also inaccessible for the mass media and the mayor of Bishkek only talked to an NBT journalist. Media experts noted that the president warned ministers not to speak frankly to the mass media but instead should get permission from the prime minister in each specific case. The story of the "sickness-death" of the country's president in March 2008 after he left the country for more than a month was the most outstanding consequence of the lack of access to information.

The struggle to provide a guaranteed access to information law is being waged by civil society representatives. A number of NGOs took the Ministry of Education to court to demand information on a project being implemented under a grant from an international organization. The human rights activist M. Kuleshov sued the leader of the local self-government in the Chui Regional Court and the court fined the government official for not providing information. Several NGOs sued the Ak-Zhol Parliamentary Group, as it does not allow the public to be present at its sessions. As the political party is not a government structure, the court refused to oblige the MPs to be transparent. There was only one successful instance in court of the mass media getting access to information and this was by the Vzglyad newspaper. Journalists have not yet taken up this struggle however. In general, journalists are passive and argue they do not have enough time for this and as yet have no plans to do so.

Panelists feel that access to foreign information can be considered free. Television channels, such as Channel 5, NTRBC, and E1TR use news from Reuters, BBC, and Euronews. However, there have been some setbacks and reductions in foreign sources. The contract concluded by Azattyl Radio with the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation was broken, as the government television channel stopped broadcasting Azattyk radio and closed down television broadcasts of the Azattyk-Media Kyrgyz Bureau. Applications by the local bureau's leaders and Azattyk Radio representatives (in The Czech Republic) and the Board of Directors of Radio and Television Broadcast Managers (US Government Department) to the state's leaders and the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation had no affect and since autumn 2008, Azattyk's radio broadcasts ceased on national radio and television.

There have been no changes in this sector and none are expected in future. Entry to the journalist's profession is

still unlimited. There are no minimum standards that would limit recruits to the profession. It is no coincidence that businessmen who have started making profits in another business often risk opening a media business, usually a newspaper. Dozens of newspapers appear and disappear every year because the people who start them have no skills or even a clear imagination of a media business. In experts' opinions, printed publications dominate new mass media.

#### **OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM**

#### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.81

The overwhelming majority of the mass media never try to give objective and balanced coverage of events. Panelist Antonina Blindina said, "Reporters never check information. I have some employees on my newspaper who can distort any facts. Thank God, I usually manage to spot these mistakes but there are exceptions and the newspaper sometimes publishes unchecked information. This is typical of all newspapers. Journalists don't bother to even find out and clarify family names." The only exception panelists could mention that met international standards was the Bishkek Press Club. It always gives every point of view on a problem and uses experts in their relevant sectors. The AkiPress news agency was also well recommended.

According to data from Alexander Kulinskiy, the Chair of the Press Complaints Commission, it received 74 complaints in 2008, of which six concerned poor coverage of events. That number would be higher but conflicts are often resolved internally between the parties before a formal complaint is made. An example of a complaint against the De-facto newspaper is as follows: journalist Leila Saralaeva accused the newspaper of plagiarism because it translated her interview with an opposition politician and made no reference to the author and source when it was published as an original article. Another example was when a well-known singer and MP I. Zhunusov, the ex-Deputy Prime Minister and ex-MP E. Ibraimova tried to lodge a complaint against this newspaper. The De-facto newspaper stated that the state official had received illegal revenue because she did not guit an international project and was still getting a salary there. When Ibraimova produced documents refuting this claim the newspaper did not think it was necessary to apologize. This shows that even threats of criminal and administrative punishments do not frighten many mass media outlets and journalists. So-called opposition mass media paint events in a negative light while government mass media and those affiliated with the authorities and the first family paint them in a positive light.

The unsigned trilateral contract between US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI), the OSCE Mission in Bishkek, and NTRBC, under which some television channels were obliged to broadcast a socio-political program made with support from international organizations, shows that covering events in a good light has become the norm. In the same way, the trilateral contract between NDI, OSCE, and NTRBC on re-broadcasting radio and television broadcasts of Azattyk Radio was cancelled unilaterally. There was speculation about why this contract was cancelled, but experts think the real problem was that foreign mass media representatives wanted to cover political issues in a manner that is not beneficial for the authorities.

There are some in the mass media that do not hide the corrupt character of newspapers or programs. *Tribuna* newspaper makes its pages available to all who want and can buy them. There are even cases where dirt has been spread about a specific politician or public figure and the compromised man can "buy" the next issue of this newspaper to show himself to be an ideal politician or publish discrediting information about his opponents.

No journalists adhere to ethical standards. Journalists have neither special training4 nor the tools to regulate the situation in the media community. The coverage from journalists and outlets of the August 2008 airplane crash, when scores of children and adults perished or were injured, was a clear example of the lack of journalists' ethical standards. No journalists thought it was wrong to force interviews with relatives of the deceased immediately after bodies had been identified. A journalist from the NTRBC, who was standing near the airplane's fragments with a semi-burnt security instruction card, said ironically that none of the passengers had followed these instructions. Another significant fact is that bitter quarrels take place between colleagues of outlets with different political orientations. The Beliy Parohod Internet publication, Agym newspaper and others are especially abusive. Publication of compromising photos and collages that insult human dignity have become the norm in Kyrgyz journalism. Panelist Alexander Kulinskiy comments on this: "The MK in Kyrgyzstan newspaper recently printed on its first page that an infant died because of a power blackout in a maternity hospital but there was no mention of the infant in the article. The Delo # newspaper always states that the sun shines equally on everybody,

as the newspaper has been struggling for the rights of all population groups. When publishing information about a murdered person from Poland, the newspaper suggested the person's "alternative sexual orientation" was the reason he was murdered."

Censorship and self-censorship have become a fact of life for the overwhelming majority of outlets. Antonina Blindina, the editor of the *Chui Izvestia* government newspaper and *For You* private newspaper quoted an example, "Our newspaper has started making digests of publications from the most popular newspapers in Kyrgyz. We were sure it was important in the political sense so that the Russian-speaking population was informed about all key discussions in the country. Readers immediately responded enthusiastically that this column was called for but after the first two issues of the digest we were invited to the court to frighten us; after the third issue we were notified by phone when they asked us directly, "Why do you need this?" So we closed this column. I have to pay my 15 employees and I have a family. As a result, our readers have been cut off from discussions conducted in Kyrgyz."

Television workers are experiencing special difficulties in this area and whereas the printed media still reflect a wide range of political bias this is not so in the television format. Many journalists agree to self-censorship when they invite guests to their studios who are more or less loyal to the authorities just to get them to agree to be interviewed, thus concealing various critical information. As the list of prohibited subjects is more or less clear to everyone, journalists have to go navigate these reefs and mention nothing that is prohibited. The media representative Ilim Karypbekov noted that the fact that there are several Articles in the Criminal Code of the Kyrgyz Republic designed especially for the criminal

# JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

#### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Only in 2008 has a small special course on journalists' ethics been included in the curricula of Journalist Faculties. This course doesn't use special material but an existing Russian textbook. In 2008 under the auspices of the Press Complaints Commission methodological material was written on journalists' ethics, which will be disseminated and available to all Higher Education Institutions

prosecution of journalists shows objective reasons why self-censorship exists.

Determining the social significance of events varies depending on the ownership of the outlet and the closeness to the authorities or opposition. All government television channels, as a rule, talk of the routine work of the government at the highest level. As part of a UNDP project in 2008 showed, over 90 percent of all those shown as news-makers are the President of the country, the Prime Minister and MPs. Local authorities appear less frequently and ordinary people are not key subjects in the news at all. Coverage of opposition leaders is taboo in the government mass media. For example, Kubat Otorbaev, the director of Azattyk Media states that showing such opposition politicians, such as O. Tekebaev on the Inconvenient Questions Program, was the reason why the NTRBC of the Kyrgyz Republic refused to meet its contractual obligations. There is a whole list of subjects that government media and media affiliated with the authorities are prohibited from covering, including family affairs of state leaders, sources of money and businesses of key politicians, and so on. Kubat Otorbaev said that "overall there is a trend that many mass media are avoiding critical subjects due to censorship and are turning into so-called "yellow" press. Analytical broadcasts, such as Betme Bet, Yngaysyz Suroolop, 21st Studio, Koz Karash, Epicenter, Kungoi Teskey, and Kyrgyz Okmotundo broadcast by the National Television and Radio Company ceased in 2008, although the Company broadcasts countrywide." The trend to conceal certain political and economic subjects is aided by the lack of attention to the everyday lives of ordinary people. This has made the coverage of the government mass media and those affiliated with the authorities far removed from the reality of the everyday situation in Kyrgyzstan. The opposition mass media does just the same but with the focus on opposition leaders and organizations and criticizing those in power. Ordinary people and events from their lives are ignored here if they don't protest against state policy.

Panelist Marat Tokoev said, "The Agym newspaper greatly influenced the development of the mass media in Kyrgyz. The gutter press style of completely ignoring ethics and morals is very effective commercially and this style and approach is all the rage in Kyrgyz media, the only exception being the Zaman-Kyrgyzstan newspaper. In regards to using experts' opinions, I will become an "omnivorous" media expert as soon as the mass media ask me to comment on issues of management, professional ethics, and human rights issues."

There is some cultural mass media coverage in the languages of ethnic minorities but the press in ethnic languages is forbidden from socio-political coverage. As a result, they do not cover actual problems in their Diasporas' lives and cover

only cultural events that take place with the permission and support of the authorities.

Panelists were divided regarding the term "corruption" as applied to the journalist's profession. Some experts think journalists produce media products to order but this is not corruption because journalists have neither the power nor freedom to choose. Other experts recognize that the symbolic power of media coverage means that all cases of abuse to gain personal benefit by journalists is considered corruption. However, both groups of experts agreed that articles written to order, extortions by journalists and taking bribes is normal practice among almost all of the mass media. For some, articles to order are the main source of income. Columns in newspapers and air time on television are sold both by mass media bosses and every journalist within the limits of his or her "competence." Thus, when earning KGS 2,000 to KGS 2,500 (\$55 to \$70) per month on national television, journalists have been appearing on certain broadcasts for years and do not want to look for better paid work. As a rule, such journalists are not poor. Panelists quoted examples of especially corrupt outlets, such as the Sary Ozon Regional Television Company and Tagdyr on NTRBC.

In general, journalists' corruptibility and low salaries are inextricably linked. Journalists' salaries depend on who owns their outlet and their regional and national status. Regional outlets are really struggling. Panelists quoted the example of several weekly newspapers published by the journalist E. Sadybaev. He is the founder and owner of these outlets, and does everything himself. It is practically impossible to hire workers because these publications may only generate KGS 1,000 per month and naturally, good specialists would not agree to such a salary. The average salary for a regional newspaper journalist or reporter is KGS 1,500 to KGS 3,000 per month. The only strategy for regional journalists is to work for several outlets at once. It is clear that this situation will become permanent without drastic change.

In the capital city's mass media, salaries are higher at KGS 6,000 to KGS 10,000 per month. However a number of elite journalists get much more, KGS 25,000 and up, working for a number of private and even government outlets. Many private outlets have false accounts to avoid taxes on large earnings. In this connection, journalists think neither of the negative influence of such hidden revenues on future pensions nor the government's interest in filling its coffers.

The tendency to commercialize the mass media continued in 2008. With increasing pressure from the authorities the free mass media companies prefer not to touch public-political subjects and choose to develop entertainment content instead. The most popular newspaper is *Super Info*, has a daily circulation of 82,000 followed by similar newspapers

that cover mainly entertainment. Entertainment content is rapidly replacing socio-political content on public television and according to Ilim Karypbekov, this is also an indicator of self-censorship in the mass media.

In 2008 entertainment products of the Ibarat literary and musical studio alone made up about 40 percent of total broadcasting on NTRC. If similar programs produced by other studios and newspapers are included, they account for more than half of all broadcasts.

Panelist Ilim Karypbekov describes the situation of radio stations: "In regard to radio stations, I know of none with a socio-political direction with the exception of BBC and Azattyk. Musical content is safer and convenient for the authorities and satisfies certain tastes of the audience."

At the same time, in the pre-election period even purely entertainment-focused outlets cover news. It is symbolic that at the end of 2007 before the parliamentary elections, Kylych Sultanov the owner of the *Super Info*, was recruited by the well-known politician Tursunbai Bakir uulu and entered in the party list as the second candidate. Since then *Super Info* has gradually been increasing its news content.

According to panelists, the mass media are decades behind in technical terms. Most printed publications have a single computer and regional newspapers rarely have any functioning equipment. They are still doing everything by hand in notebooks, as they have no modern voice recorders and lack funds to develop Internet versions of their media products.

Printing technology has made a big step forward since an independent printing press was set up in the Mass Media Support Centre five years ago. The state printing house was forced to compete and to significantly upgrade their equipment. However, in spite of constant attempts to update and modernize printing facilities, everything is still technically at least twenty years behind, said A. Miasarov the Director General of the Mass Media Support Centre.

The situation with television companies is even direr. Even the largest one, the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation, possesses only five MPEG and seven DVCam cameras while the daily content produced is 8-9 hours; the majority of private and regional companies use semi-professional and amateur equipment. Few mass media companies buy licensed software and NTRC KR, for example, cannot even use the News Factory program, which requires a Windows licensed package.

Many television and radio broadcasting companies are seriously affected by the irregular electricity supply and, according to H. Hudayberdiev and A. Blindina, this has resulted in many regional broadcasting transmitters being out of service. The amount of damaged equipment has increased, transmitters and microwave-link equipment have stopped working and diesel generators require frequent maintenance and replacement.

Meanwhile, the need to equip the television companies with modern digital equipment is increasing since the target date for the country's transition to digital broadcasting in 2014 is not far off. The problem is not only in the lack of legislation covering the mass media, but also the absence of funds for the medium-term development of the mass media. For example, the state mass media can barely get enough funds for essential needs from the State Budgetsalaries and taxes. Items such as travel expenses, vehicles and repair of equipment are not provided for in the Budget, let alone technological development and purchasing materials. Interestingly, the State has run a pilot project in Batken Province introducing digital television. As a result, only a few residents of Batken Province with modern televisions can watch the local digital television. Two other southern provinces, Jalalabat and Osh, are next in line. However, the National Agency for Communications and the Ministry of Culture and Information have no strategic plan for step-by-step television digitization.

Specialized journalism has been struggling to come into existence. Recently some initiatives and attempts have been made regarding training, specializing in and creating special media products. The Akipress news agency has started to develop a supplement—a magazine about health - along with some business content. Yet most attempts have ended in failure. For example, the magazine ARTISHOK was published only twice and the BiStyle magazine appeared only once. There is only one commercially profitable specialized journal, the Obustroistvo I remont DIY magazine, which has found its place in the mass media market.

The vehicle press has experienced a moderate upturn but previously developed types of journalism, such as parliamentary journalism, are gradually dying and there has been no real progress in business journalism either.

In 2008 several organizations started teaching special journalism: the Mass Media Support Centre ran a training course called "Mass Media Management Laboratory"; the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Fund continued teaching investigative journalism; the Journalists NGO organized seminars to highlight the problem of terrorism and extremism; the Bishkek Press Club organized a school of journalism providing a number of specialized courses, including economic and gender journalism.

#### **OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS**

#### Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.25

In 2008, the prices of print media increased and that led, on the one hand, to the collapse of foreign (mainly Kazakh and Russian) newspapers and magazines and on the other hand to fewer mass media products in the regions. Panelist Miasarov Andrew said that "The prices of print products do not correspond to the purchasing power of the population and this reduces the number of information sources." One of the most important reasons why newspapers cost more was that Kyrgyzspochtasy, the Kyrgyz post office that has a monopoly in distributing mass media products, raised its prices by 100 percent. Even the most profitable newspaper, Super Info, had to raise its retail price to KGS 13 (\$.35). To pay more than KGS 160 a month for a newspaper is an unaffordable luxury for the average village family. It is clear that people will still buy the cheapest newspapers, which are mostly local, in order to get television program listings and a minimum of local and national news. These newspapers, however, are far behind those published in the capital as to quality and content. Panelist Antonina Blindina highlights further problems with Kyrgyzpochtasy: "the Kyrgyzpochtasy State Enterprise refuses to deliver newspapers for sale in the regions thus annihilating the system of subscription meaning that only local newspapers are available in villages, the quality and design of which are unfortunately not competitive with newspapers published in Bishkek."

Internet blogging is just beginning to develop in Kyrgyzstan; according to experts, about two hundred bloggers continually update their pages. Given that no more than 10 percent of the population has permanent access to the Internet, it is understandable that this type of information and communication will not significantly influence the development of society for a long time.

On the whole citizens have unrestricted access to domestic and foreign mass media. Cost is the only natural constraint. In 2008 the Internet Television Project was being prepared, but it has not yet been implemented due to the low technical parameters; Akipress attempted to develop the mobile Internet market, but that project was commercially unprofitable because of the very limited demand.

It could be said that a number of websites were repeatedly blocked in Kyrgyzstan, but, as the media representative Ilim Karypbekov stated, there is no evidence that this has knowingly been done by the Government. The Internet is still a free zone. Panelist Kubat Otorbaev refutes this claim by saying "In 2008 the Kyrgyztelecom blocked access to the Azattyk Internet website for more than 20 days. After

appeals to the Government and Kyrgyztelecom the website was unblocked."

Because all print and electronic mass media have traditionally used the Internet, coverage is broader than the number of Internet users. This was the underlying reason for the appearance of the news block in Kyrgyz on the website of the popular Azattyk Media, www.azattyk.kg. Thus, although it has lost a large audience on national television and radio, Azattyk media reaches an audience through its news being reprinted in local newspapers.

The state mass media do not edit political news independently and are very dependent on the 'agenda' set by the political elite. E1TR Public TV airs no unbiased public-political information reflecting key events and no significant non-political public content. Moreover, the broadcast content is barren of any social importance (there is no educational content or programs in the languages of ethnic minorities). None of the state mass media meet international standards of journalism.

The following news agencies are currently operating in the country: Kabar (public), Akipress, 24kg, and Zamandash press. The www.azattyk.kg website also acts as a news agency providing information for free, while the website of the Bishkek Press Club is the most popular as a source of material for other mass media (www.bpc.kg).

Most panelists noted problems in the work of each of the news agencies. The Kabar public news agency focuses exclusively on official information and material is not very professionally presented. The 24kg agency often provides

# MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

#### **PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:**

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

unverified and unreliable information and does not cover all the key events in the country. The Zamandash Press agency is finding its place in the news market as its digests of world media reports seem to be the most interesting. The Bishkek Press Club presents analytical information, its professionalism is remarkable and represents every possible point of view on each issue by experts. However, the large amount of information and professional standards makes this site "inconvenient" both for the public and opposition mass media, which present differently-colored but equally biased information on events.

Before 2008 virtually all television and radio broadcasting companies produced their own news programs, but in the past year this practice was gradually discontinued. Pyramida ceased using their own content and switched to re-broadcasting RenTV programs. Some radio stations don't run news programs at all and just broadcast music.

Consumers do not have access to information about owners of the outlets, the existence or lack of media holdings and monopolies in the mass media sphere. Rumors are circulating among experts about who owns the various outlets and which of them are members of conglomerates, but there is no actual proof. Panelist Kubat Otorbaev stated, "There is a state and family monopoly of TV broadcasting and newspapers. Although there is no information on the owners of the companies, their names are well-known to the public." A remarkable fact is that every time the Agym newspaper publishes a particularly cynical or unethical article, those who are considered to be the official owners of the newspaper publicly declare they have recently sold it. Yet experts believe that the founder and first owner of the newspaper, M.M.Eshimkanov, did not sell it until the end of 2008. On the other hand, there are allegations about the media outlets owned by Alexander Kim, which includes the newspapers VB and MSN. Experts believe that the real head of the media outlets is a member of the President's family and currently the list includes a number of television and radio broadcasting companies, as well as the Lenta advertising agency. The Sharshekeev media holding is still functioning and publishes 14 print publications.

In 2008 media experts gathered quite a lot of evidence that the media holdings alleged to be run by the President's son are expanding and there are good grounds to believe that by the next elections (in 2009 both pre-term parliamentary and the next presidential elections could take place<sup>5</sup>) all the

key mass media, including national television, will be a part of this private media holding. This will provide an ideological basis for re-election of the current President of the Kyrgyz Republic.

As already mentioned, neither the public nor the private mass media are aimed at producing publicly important information content. Even public outlets don't aim to provide information covering the various ethnic and social minorities.

In the south there are private television and radio broadcasting companies and newspapers in the Uzbek language, the most popular being OshTV, Mezon TV and DDD. However, after the introduction of the new Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, this has become more risky. If they don't broadcast at least 50 percent of their own media products in Kyrgyz, the State language, they can be closed down and the Uzbek speaking audience would be deprived of accessible local mass media.

The Government does not consider it necessary to harmonize the inter-ethnic situation and no programs in Uzbek are produced by the state television channels for the second largest ethnic group. This is not the first year there have been no news broadcasts in Uzbek on NTRC. However, NTRC is the only channel that broadcasts news summaries with sign language for the deaf once a day.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 1.48** 

The mass media in Kyrgyzstan are often not recognized as businesses and continue to function as ideological tools in the struggle for power. As a result, efficient management is a very rare event and the mass media are rarely profitable. Despite falling sales, the majority of media managers and owners still do not plan to employ professional managers and marketing specialists. However, the Mass Media Support Centre organized a series of seminars and training courses on mass media management.

Other related businesses do not typically work efficiently and are generally not profitable. There are just a few are successful, such as the independent printing house, which not only helps publications improve their packaging and re-branding, but also does not increase prices for its services throughout the year despite the rising cost of paper and plates.

Kyrgyzbasmasoz, which has a monopoly over the distribution network, is among the most unprofessional related enterprises. No private delivery network can compete with

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The Constitutional Court is currently deciding when the next presidential elections will take place, as according to the previous version of the Constitution the elections have to be held in October 2009, whereas according to the new version—in 2010

the public "monster" since no alternative network has national coverage. Small networks cannot compete on prices for services but Kyrgyzsbasmasoz does not meet its obligations to its clients; newspapers are not delivered on time and are delivered irregularly. Kyrgyzbasmasoz often becomes a tool the authorities use to combat disagreeable mass media.

All television transmitters are the property of the state agency the Production Association for Relay Lines, Television, and Radio Broadcasting (RPO RMTR), which paradoxically is a part of the Kyrgyztelecom Joint Stock Company. All television channels have to pay very high fees to RPO RMTR to relay signals but the quality is often poor value for the money. For many years there have been problems between NTRC KR and RPO RMTR because of the poor image quality on the first national channel. The national corporation, which has to pay most of its budget to relay signals (KGS 180 million, or about \$5 million, per year), blames RPO RMTR. RPO RMTR does not admit its guilt and tries to convince people that the poor quality of signals is caused by bad communications lines from the television studios to RPO RMTR transmitters. They also claim that it is a consequence of incompatible technologies of media content production and transmitting.

Among the income sources traditionally attributed to the domestic mass media, the volume of advertisements in all genres of the mass media fell in 2008. In Kyrgyzstan, newspapers losses were 50 percent. On television channel NTS advertisements fell by 10 percent and they virtually ceased on Mir TV. The advertising revenues of cable television companies also fell significantly. As Khudaiberdiev stated, even KATEL, a major advertiser, stopped advertising their services in the mass media in the south.

Subscriptions as a source of income are applicable for only a few public newspapers, *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* and *Erkin Too*, since the authorities force all public employees, pensioners and beneficiaries to subscribe to them. There has been a real decline in earnings compared to the rising costs of producing media. That has meant that most outlets have had to raise their prices for newspapers, but the resulting fall in circulation numbers can become the reason why newspapers go bankrupt.

Professional advertising specialists rarely work in the mass media. Panelist Kubat Otorbaev explained, "Advertisers work mainly with a few mass media monopolists such as NTRC and Vecherny Bishkek. If NTRC is a natural monopolist as its programs are broadcasted all over Kyrgyzstan, the newspaper Vecherny Bishkek is an artificially established monopolist in the market owing to the newspaper's policy of taking the official political line of the White House." Even the largest media companies, with special advertising departments,

cannot always employ professionals. Selling newspaper space and airtime are among the most advanced advertising methods and the electronic mass media cannot do this due to the lack of ratings surveys.

In the course of the year the leading advertising agency was Lenta, whose clients are large and small outlets who are often under pressure from the authorities, according to panelists Kulinsky and Blindina.

On the whole, in 2008 according to experts, the total advertising market did not exceed \$5 million, and the spread of advertising flows was irregular. The *VB* newspaper still retains its status of an "authorized advertising monopolist." Note that this status has not been awarded to the natural monopolist in terms of audience, NTRC KR.

Blindina said, "Advertising agencies are not very active when working with the mass media. Most of them set high prices for their services: from 30 to 50 percent and in rural areas the market is poorly developed." Panelist Ernis Mamyrkanov of the Ministry of Culture and Information said, "In the regions the situation with advertising revenues is so pitiful that mass media are still at the embryonic stage of development. It can be said that regional mass media are owned by information fanatics instead of businessmen and the main income sources of the mass media are services rendered to local inhabitants that could hardly be called advertising revenues and grants for upgrading and enlarging the mass media technical base are very rare."

Since the advertising market is small and underdeveloped in the regions, the majority of the mass media does not expect increased advertising revenue and counts mainly on the income from sales. Perhaps only a few outlets can

# INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

#### **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:**

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

demonstrate relatively standard figures. Panelists consider the *Avtogid* newspaper to be one where advertising revenue is not less than 85 percent, while income from sales does not exceed 15 percent.

Blindina noted that despite the fact that there are more than 100 advertising agencies, most outlets cannot cooperate with them because of the crippling terms offered by advertisers. Advertising agents often take up to 50 percent. Moreover, the decline in advertising by major manufacturers and other legal entities has already become noticeable in the capital and even applies to the *VB*. Unlike previous years, at the end of this year the newspaper published virtually only private ads.

Adverse economic conditions and the growing monopoly of Lenta in the mass media market has resulted in many advertising agencies beginning to work on a barter basis as they did in the early 1990s.

The state media is not fully funded from state budget funds. Independent mass media organizations do not receive direct state subsidies, although there is a list of various privileges noted earlier for affiliated mass media. Some further examples are advantages in the distribution of advertising, free access to information sources, and unrestricted listing on the list of seconded journalists.

Panelist Kubat Otorbaev pointed out, "The fact that state subsidies can deprive private mass media of their independence has been proven by the examples of some publications. After the events of March 24, 2005, the Government started to render overt and covert support to the independent newspapers Jany Ordo, Enesai, and others that influenced their work and content. The editorial building of the newspaper Jany Ordo belongs to the President's Administration of the Kyrgyz Republic. In reality in Kyrgyzstan, any state subsidies turn into tools for putting pressure on the editorial policy of any mass media.

But in 2008 the Law on Social Orders was passed, which could greatly change the fate of the leading independent outlets in the Republic. If the Government follows the experience of neighboring states in working with the mass media based on grants for social orders, we can confidently expect the state will allocate funds to support non-government mass media. Most likely, this will include the moderate opposition outlets, which the authorities would like to control using social orders as bait.

Nevertheless, while anticipating the introduction of grants, the mass media community has split into two groups. Some believe that grants will make the mass media lose their independence, while others believe that it is a way to produce socially important content while maintaining their own beliefs and principles.

The situation with market research has changed very little in recent years. Panelist Marat Tokoev said, "The field of media market research has been virtually untouched. The advertising market is not estimated and the mass media cannot work with ads and attract other income sources, due mainly to not being seen as businesses. The mass media serve people's interests and are a tool to accomplish mainly economic and political goals." There are a number of research companies that publish their findings in ratings tables. However, no single survey gives its methodology and its basic characteristics, such as selection criteria and uncertainties. Panelists have no information on subscriptions in market research results and the number of outlets using the research results to improve their management approach.

While there is a lack of reliable information on ratings among the television and radio broadcasting companies, the print outlets have problems reliably estimating circulation figures, though conditions vary. The statutory requirement to give actual circulation figures for publications printed by the independent printing house is being fulfilled, but this requirement appears to be time consuming and unnecessary for newspapers printed by the other two public printing houses. Thus, in the country there are simultaneously newspapers showing actual circulation figures, newspapers showing no figures at all and newspapers showing made up circulation figures.

There is currently no official body producing newspapers' circulation figures and providing the public with reliable information. The Mass Media Support Centre attempted to create "the most popular newspapers" section on its website, which would include information on publications with the highest circulations. The Directorate of Independent Printing Houses asked competitors from the public sector<sup>6</sup> for these figures but could not get any reliable information.

#### **OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS**

**Kyrgyzstan Objective Score: 2.08** 

A critical professional association working on behalf of broadcasters in Kyrgyzstan is the Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (ART). Their mission is to deliver advertisements to regional members of the association. In 2008 ART was re-registered and continued its work not only as "the advertising agent" of regional electronic mass media, but also as a public organization to protect the interests of its members. In particular, ART actively lobbied for amendments to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic "On Television and Radio Broadcasting."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Besides the public printing houses "Uchkun" and "Erkin Too" there is also a private printing house—"Plyus" which prints 8 newspapers.

The Association of Publishers and Distributors of Periodical Press, founded at the end of the year, is actively engaged in promoting the mass media law and has started working out action plans. The mission of the Association is defined as follows: to lobby the interests of book and periodical publishing and to turn newspapers into profitable, investment-attracting businesses. It is worth noting that the chair of the Association is A. Miasarov, the General Director of CP SMI, which probably accounts for the independent printing house's high prestige.

There is no Union of Journalists in Kyrgyzstan, however there are numerous public organizations supporting the mass media, some of which define themselves as human rights protectors. The most active media organizations are the Institute of Media Representative (IMR), the Journalists Public Association, the Bishkek Press Club, the Press Complaints Commission and the Mass Media NGO. Most of these media organizations provide the following services to journalists and the mass media: legal advice, court attorneys, training and monitoring freedom of speech. In 2008, for the first time, four organizations (the Institute of Media Representative, Journalists Public Association, ART and the Press Complaints Commission) implemented a unique Media Train project. The main idea of the project was to create a positive public image of the mass media and teach techniques of interaction between the public and the mass media.

Before the "train" departed for the regions a special video report was made about the hardships of working as a journalist and the social importance of journalism in society. All meetings with the population were held under the key slogans "By cooperating with the mass media, you make life better," "Quality information = quality life," and "Better a friend of the media than an enemy of the media."

The year was also remarkable in that representatives of almost all media organizations gathered in the Chychkan Valley and held a forum. The forum resulted in the creation of the "Partnership Network of Media Organizations in Kyrgyzstan" to consolidate efforts to protect freedom of speech and develop journalism.

Panelist Kubat Otorbaev noted that "Some non-governmental organizations, such as "Journalists," "Kylym Shamy," "Citizens Against Corruption" and the "Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society," actively cooperate with the mass media to protect the freedom of speech and independence. For example, when NTRC blocked Azattyk radio broadcasts or court proceedings were instituted against the newspapers *De facto*, *Alibi* and *Achyk sayasat*, all the above-mentioned NGOs reacted, considering the events violations of the freedom of speech."

The influence of media organizations on mass media activities was shown by a symbolic event organized by three organizations at the end of 2008 (Journalists NGO, the Institute of Media Representatives and Media Centre PA) that resulted in establishing the National Newspaper Awards in three categories:

- Annual circulation (awarded to the Super Info Newspaper),
- Annual development (awarded to the Avtogid Newspaper),
- Breakthrough of the Year (awarded to the *De facto* Newspaper)

Last year saw amendments to the Law on the Mass Media and media organizations focused their activities on participating in this key event. Such organizations as IMR and the Press Complaints Commission did a lot to improve constructive interaction between NGOs and the authorities. As media representative I. Karypbekov metaphorically noted "we have built bridges of understanding." The NGOs used a variety of strategies, including equating the members of media organizations as members of the Public Chamber to further influence decisions made by the Government, as well as participating in working groups of the Ministry of Art and Culture. However, there were a lot of disappointments along the way. The authorities' declared willingness to cooperate often turned out to just be a formality and NGOs were simply ignored. Nevertheless, active participants in media organizations are confident that the strategies are correct and positive results will be achieved.

In 2008, according to the panelists, there were negative trends in the development of media organizations. According to Ernis Mamyrkanov, the activity of media NGOs has fallen sharply since "Internews-Kyrgyzstan," which was pivotal in

# SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

giving grants, ceased functioning. Indeed, there are few media organizations left and the others have started working in the methodological sphere instead of serving the interests of the mass media and publications.

There are no quality academic programs for journalists. There is a large gap between the old theoretical assumptions and the practices of the modern mass media, and this fact is not addressed in any of the higher education institutions. Even the most conservative teachers, who always insisted that journalism is a vocation and it is impossible to succeed in the profession without talent, recognize that the education programs do not contribute to producing professional journalists.

The school of journalism in the Bishkek Press Club has become a cultural experiment for teachers of journalistic faculties. There have been attempts to create a communications platform between mass media representatives and organizations supporting media, teachers and students of journalistic faculties, and representatives of the Ministry of Education. There have been discussions on introducing a new list of concentrations such as mass media management, but gaining practical experience is still a key problem for the majority of universities.

Today there are at least three standards of journalism education in Higher Education Institutions:

- The approved state standard mainly repeats the curriculum
  of the Moscow State University, with a classical bias
  towards philology and literature (this method is used by
  KNU, BHU, I. Arabaev University, etc.). It should be noted
  that practical work in the KNU has not been properly
  applied and the graduates are not aware of how methods
  work in practice.
- The mixed model consists of Turkish standards and Kyrgyz teaching capacity. In this case there is a trend towards producing documentary and feature films and attempts to develop television journalism (this standard is applied at the Manas Turkish University).
- The Americanized model focuses on studying the social processes of mass communications development. Students study public relations and advertising but the availability of a practical base (student newspaper and television training equipment) allows the students to actively integrate into the leading television companies. However there is a paradox here. The teaching is in English and implies studying cases from the American context.

In 2008 short-term seminars and training courses were held and supported by such organizations as Internews Network, Soros-Kyrgyzstan Fund, the Journalists NGO, and CP Media. Most seminars were focused on those possessing basic skills and knowledge and were aimed at expanding specialized skills and knowledge. As panelists noted, however, the high turnover of employees in the sphere makes basic seminars on reporters' skills and editing necessary and only CP Media PA organized a basic 3-month school. Ten people attended the course and three specialists graduated. Mass media representatives, especially the managers, often ask for residential training courses to be organized where they can be actively involved in the production process.

The entire print media is printed by four companies, the state run Uchkun and Erkin Too, the private "Plus," and the public independent printing house "CP Media." The printing houses work in unequal conditions. Thus, Uchkun and the independent printing house possess more advanced technology; Erkin Too and Plus are limited, in this sense. On the other hand, there are benefits for the state mass media in the form of unofficial tax breaks for state printing houses. Since 2008 a particularly important advantage for "the state run companies has included regulated electricity supply, which meant that the electricity supply of CP Media was cut off but that for Uchkun was not. This year the number of customers of the state printing house increased and the daily print run grew by half a million, but the limits on electricity supply remained, as approved on January 1, 2008. The state printing houses are always used at critical moments as tools to apply political pressuring on undesirable publications.

Panelist Kubat Otorbaev stated that, "The only enterprise covering all of Kyrgyzstan is "Kyrgyzpochtasy," which remains under the control of the Government and this is reflected in its work. In 2008 there were events when the authorities used Kyrgyzpochtasy to block the distribution channels of independent publications. Television and radio transmitters are also under state control. The Government has a lot of tools with which to put pressure on Internet-providers too." However, the number of independent distribution channels has started to increase slowly but the conditions for developing alternative non-government structures are not equal and are discriminatory. Thus, the alternative press delivery and sales network "Kyrgyzbasmasoz" encounters serious difficulties when obtaining permits from local authorities to set up newspaper kiosks. There is no possibility of obtaining long-term leases or opening kiosks in the capital either.

It is difficult to overcome Kyrgyztelezom's domination over Internet providers as it issues permits for this activity and inhibits the development of communications technologies. Currently, the following providers are working in the country, Asia-info, ElCat, Katel, Jet and the new satellite alternative channel, Aknet. It is obvious that any kind of monopoly is used by the state authorities to exert pressure on independent outlets. It is difficult to avoid the dictates for printing houses and electronic mass media as well.

#### **List of Panel Participants**

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**Antonina Blindina,** chief editor, *Chuiskie Izvestiya* newspaper, Bishkek

**Ilim Karypbekov,** director, Media Representative Institute, Bishkek

Kubat Otorbaev, director, Azattyk Media, Bishkek

**Marat Tokoev,** chair, Board of the Journalists' Public Organization, Bishkek

Uson Kasybekov, independent journalist, Bishkek

**Khalilzhan Khudaiberdiev**, director, Osh Television and Radio Company; president, the Mass Media Association, Osh

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#### **Moderator and Author**

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