

KYRGYZSTAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



KYRGYZSTAN

AT A GLANCE

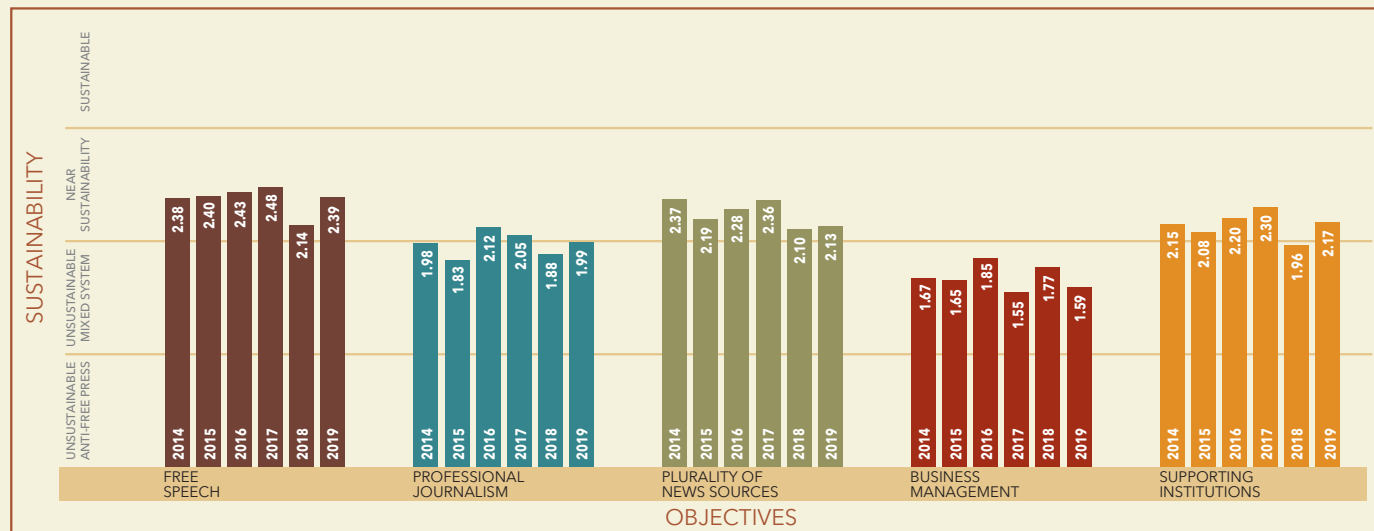
GENERAL

- **Population:** 6,256,700 (National Statistical Committee, 2018)
- **Capital city:** Bishkek
- **Ethnic groups (percent of population):** Kyrgyz 73.3%, Uzbek 14.7%, Russian 5.6%, Dungan 1.1%, Uighur 0.9%, other 4.4% (National Statistical Committee, 2018)
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5% (CIA World Factbook, 2009)
- **Languages (% of population):** Kyrgyz (official) 73.2%, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian (official) 9%, other 5.2% (CIA World Factbook, 2009)
- **GNI (2013-Atlas):** \$6,990.03 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **GNI per capita (2013-PPP):** \$3,620 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.52%; male 99.64%, female 99.41% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, March 13, 2016)
- **President or top authority:** President Sooronbay Jeenbekov (since November 24, 2017)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active media outlets:** More than 1,500 registered media. Print: 159 active outlets, including 3 main dailies and 4 other major papers. Radio stations: 26. Television stations: 25 terrestrial, 3 local cable networks, 3 IPTV (Ministry of Justice, 2013)
- **Broadcast ratings:** Top-three television: OTRK (state-owned), KTRK Musyka (state-owned), Pervyi kanal (Russian Federation) (M-Vektor, 2017)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top three by circulation: *Super Info* (private Kyrgyz-language daily with 88,000 circulation), *Vecherniy Bishkek* (private Russian-language daily with 45,000 circulation, but appears to have recently gone online only), *Avtogid* (private Russian-language weekly with 12,000 circulation) (unofficial estimates)
- **News agencies:** AKIpress (private), 24.kg (private), Kabar (state-owned), K-News (private), www.kyrtag.kg (private), Vesti (private), Kaktus Media (private), Kloop Media (private), Turmush (private), Region (private), KyrgyzToday.kg (private)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Television: \$16.5 million, radio: \$2.7 million (Expert Consulting Agency, January–December 2017), Internet: \$500,000 (Expert Consulting Agency, January–September 2013)
- **Internet usage:** 2.11 million users (We are Social, 2018 Global Digital Report)
- **Mobile subscription:** 7.91 million or 130% of population (We are Social, 2018 Global Digital Report)
- **Active social media users:** 1.30 million or 21% of population (We are Social, 2018 Global Digital Report)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: KYRGYZSTAN



SCORE KEY

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.



Almost all of Kyrgyzstan's objective-level scores increased, resulting in a higher overall score of 2.05 and placing the country in the "Near Sustainability" MSI classification. Objective 4 (Business Management) is the only score that regressed, which MSI panelists attributed to factors such as lack of business and management strategies, scarce advertising, and a dearth of dedicated business-focused staff working in media outlets. Other challenges facing the media sector include governmental pressure on journalists and media organizations, self-censorship, low levels of media literacy, and inadequate university-level journalism programs.

An anticorruption campaign snared a number of high-ranking politicians and set off an information war in Kyrgyzstan's media coverage of political and economic events in 2018. The series of high-profile arrests targeting members of former President Almazbek Atambayev's inner circle began with Prime Minister Sapar Isakov, and later included Kubanychbek Kulmatov, the former mayor of Bishkek. Notably, the key source of opposition to coverage of the developments came from the Aprel television channel—a spring 2018 newcomer founded by Atambayev.

The popular media played up a series of interviews of Atambayev broadcast by Aprel, along with President Sooronbay Jeenbekov's rebuttals and counterattacks. To counter the attacks on the current government, all the court cases against media outlets and public figures—featuring the news agency 24.kg and journalist Kabay Karabekov as defendants, with multimillion sum pretenses for the damage of honor and dignity of Jeenbekov—were revisited and dropped. Atambayev followed suit and dropped the financial aspect of his five lawsuits

against journalist Naryn Ayip, Editor-in-Chief of Zanoza.kg news outlet (now Kaktus.Media) Dina Maslova; and human rights defender Cholpon Jakupova (also director of the legal clinic Adilet), reducing the charges to demands that they publish rebuttals of their accusations against him.

Jeenbekov has expressed his support for the independence of the mass media as the foundation of democracy and ensured his willingness to cooperate with mass media. His change of heart did not stop at purging the ranks of his political opponents but stretched to "economic" cases with an obvious political pretext.

The long-running battle for the private company Vecherniy Bishkek—along with its printing house and newspaper, and the advertising company Rubikon—took a new turn after Aleksandr Ryabushkin, with help from close associates of then-President Atambayev, muscled out its owner, Aleksandr Kim, in 2014. In 2018, Ryabushkin was arrested, and Vecherniy Bishkek was returned to its former owner, Kim.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH****2.39**

The legal framework in Kyrgyzstan, including the constitution, guarantees freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, the authorities kept up their prosecution of media outlets, journalists, and human rights activists; denied several journalists access to public meetings; and did not always honor their obligation to release official information upon request.

In 2017, three main codes relevant to media were revised and amended: the criminal code, the criminal procedure code, and the correctional code. In addition, two new codes, covering violations and offenses, were introduced. The idea behind the change was to humanize the legislation; many violations were removed from the criminal code and included in the codes on violations or offenses, thus relaxing the punishments. The humanization of the legislation also includes hindering professional journalists' activity, which will be decriminalized and considered an offense under the new legislation effective January 2019. In a view backed by other panelists, Begaim Usenova, director of the Media Policy Institute, considers the change "a signal to society that the state does not consider freedom of information as one of the values that should be protected by criminal law."

Cases that undermined freedom of speech laws in 2018 included accusations against journalist Elnura Alkanova, who gained fame for her investigative reports of officials' economic crimes. In February, the state service charged her with illegally receiving and disseminating information constituting commercial secrets; the case was dropped for lack

of evidence.

In another case in January, the state national security committee opened a criminal case against a Facebook user, Temir Bolotbek, accusing him of inciting interethnic discord with a comment suggesting "those who love the USSR go to Russia" on a thread about architectural styles. Bolotbek denied the charges and said that his words were misinterpreted.

Then in April, the Supreme Court considered an appeal related to the case of Abdulloh Nurmatov, charged in 2016 with spreading extremist materials by Osh's city court. He received a one-year suspended sentence for sharing several materials about the Hizb ut-Tahrir religious organization, considered an extremist organization. The Supreme Court upheld the verdict.

The panelists did not see any barriers in mass media licensing and registration; in fact, they said officials simplified the process in 2018. The draft law on introducing amendments to the Law on Mass Media passed in the Kyrgyz Parliament; it stipulates that the government decides the order of mass media registration and re-registration. The amendments also shortened the time line for mass media outlet registration from one month to just 10 days. However, Eldiyar Arykbaev, editor-in-chief of Kloop Media, noted that the absence of a license has not prevented his outlet and its journalists from working and positioning themselves as mass media.

Few attacks on journalists were documented and reported on in 2018. In some cases, journalists failed to bring identification and wear it to clearly identify their role. The panelists agreed that none of the cases received much attention either in mass media or on social media. Moreover, according to Arykbaev, none of the attacks were premeditated; rather, the attackers were simply ignorant of or disregarded the norms of free information—for

instance, security guards who tried to prevent the Aprel channel camera crew from filming in a supermarket. The channel's director general, Dmitriy Lozhnikov, said that 10 people, including supermarket employees and a private security company, surrounded the crew, took away three cameras, and removed a memory card from one of the cameras. The journalists called the police, who helped them get their equipment back—but all the footage was erased, and the memory card was lost. The journalists sustained minor injuries and filed a complaint with the police.

In August, security personnel attacked Kaktus. Media journalist Nikilay Potryasov while he filmed a long-delayed construction site in Bishkek. Although Potryasov was not trespassing, several people in security guard uniforms demanded an ID, which he could not produce, and surrounded him and beat him. The media community, including the Union of Independent Journalists of Kyrgyzstan, reacted quickly and condemned the attack. The Media Policy Institute maintained that the journalist acted appropriately.¹ But some panelists found it unprofessional and disappointing that he did not carry ID and later withdrew his official complaint.

There were several other minor attacks on journalists throughout the year. In September, a journalist from Sputnik Kyrgyzstan began filming a traffic violation by a car belonging to the parliamentarian Tazabek Ikramov, which was stopped by the traffic police. The parliamentarian's driver attacked the journalist and tried to take away the phone. The police intervened. Then in November, a journalist based in Jalal-Abad, Sanrabiya Satybaldieva, was

¹ "Media Experts Commented on the Attack on the Journalist of Kaktus Media," Kaktus Media. August 30, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/379071_mediaspecialisty_prokommentirovali_napadenie_na_jurnalista_kaktus.media.html.

attacked by an unknown man in the street; she sustained a knife injury to her arm that required treatment at a hospital. Satybaldieva declined to file a complaint with the police, as police informed her that if the attacker could not be found she would be charged with false testimony.²

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.

Usenova mentioned that the cases did not create public outrage, suggesting that the public is not concerned about journalists. She also put some

of the blame on the journalists, for either not filing police complaints or retracting them after coming to an agreement with the attackers. To Media Policy Institute's request for official statistics, the Ministry of Internal Affairs responded that it did not possess any information about crimes against journalists for 2018.³ Usenova felt that it just illustrates the lack of law enforcement and protection of journalists in Kyrgyzstan, despite the fact that legislation prohibits hindering journalists' activities.

Almaz Ismanov, a *Novye Litsa* newspaper journalist, believes that crimes and persecution of journalists are rare now because people fear their deeds will be exposed on social media. In his opinion, new methods of pressure, such as economic pressure and threats of lawsuits, are now favored. He mentioned the press secretary of the state ecological inspection, Anara Mambetalieva, who blew the whistle on a corruption scheme involving three co-workers in August and was fired for a sit-down strike. Rather than following regular judicial procedures and having the court deal with the case, Jeenbekov asked the Security Council to investigate. After the council's commission found evidence to support Mambetalieva's claims, she was quickly reinstated; the investigation into corruption schemes will continue.

The editorial independence of state-owned and public media is non-existent, all the panelists agreed. Elena Voronina, columnist at Sputnik Kyrgyzstan online media outlet, and Usenova emphasized that the current broadcast law does not define the public status of mass media; Kyrgyzstan Tele-Radio Company (KTRK) is still a state-owned enterprise

and not a public media outlet. The members of the steering council that makes all editorial decisions are political appointees, according to the panelists. Furthermore, their selection is not transparent; the process is rigged to make sure it includes people the officials find suitable, according to Daniyar Sadiev, director of Media School named after T. Tursunaliyev. Similarly, he claimed that several members of the Yntymak public regional broadcast company's steering council were approved in violation of the organization's charter, which prohibits the inclusion of political party members and heads of mass media outlets. Moreover, he noted that material from the Department of Information released via social media just two days before the deadline included details about the competition for the positions.

In terms of libel, the panelists agreed that the dropping of lawsuits against journalists and human rights defenders by the current and former presidents marked a positive trend in 2018. However, they did not buy the notion that it was done to promote freedom of speech, and they saw political motives at play. While Atambayev agreed to dismiss financial damage claims against Ayip, the court did ultimately side with Atambayev in requiring Ayip to publish retractions of the disputed statements in his three articles.⁴

Voronina noted that there is an independent Commission for the Examination of Complaints on Mass Media tasked with publishing refutations and retractions for viewers and readers. However, few comply with the commission's decisions. Lack of mediation between the disgruntled subjects of news articles led to several new lawsuits

2 "In Kyrgyzstan, a Wounded Journalist Refused to Write a Statement," Radio Azattyk. November 12, 2018. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/29595352.html>.

3 Kostenko, Yulia, "The Kyrgyz Ministry of Internal Affairs Has no Information about Attacks on Journalists," 24.kg. November 2, 2018. https://24.kg/obschestvo/100535_mvd_kyrgyzystana_neraspolagaet_informatsiy_onapadeniyah_najurnalistov/.

4 "Naryn Ayip Was Forced to Disprove His Article from Zanoza. kg on His Author's Site," 24.kg. March 3, 2018. https://24.kg/obschestvo/77630_naryina_ayyipa_obyazali_oprovergnut_statyu_izZanoza_kgnasvoem_avtorskom_sayte/.

against journalists and media. Usenova said that Media Policy Institute lawyers worked on 25 lawsuits against mass media in 2018, but they are understaffed, with just three lawyers to cover all the cases.

In March, Alga Kylychev, a participant in the political events of April 2010 and member of the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) party, filed a lawsuit against KyrgyzToday journalist Begaly Nargozuev, who also serves as the head of the committee to protect freedom of speech. Apart from being yet another lawsuit against a mass media representative, the case became famous for the record compensation amount requested by Kylychev—KGS 70 million (\$1,005,000)—for the alleged moral harm he sustained.⁵ There are no reports on further developments, but there is speculation that the case was closed.

The multimillion lawsuits against journalists on the premise of insulting the honor and dignity of the former and sitting presidents spurred lawyers of Media Policy Institute and the legal clinic Adilet to file complaints to the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber declaring the relevant clause of the law unconstitutional. In October 2018, the Constitutional Chamber acknowledged the unconstitutional nature of the clause and ordered the government to amend the law. The panelists stressed the necessity of changing the legislation related to the protection of honor and dignity because it fails to provide a mechanism for determining the degree of moral damage. As Usenova explained, everyone has a different threshold for affronts to dignity and honor, and the court system works in a way that

absolves accusers from providing evidence of moral damages. Panelists referred to the former speaker of the Parliament, Akhmatbek Keldibekov, who filed a number of lawsuits against media in 2018, including Argument.kg and Asia-News journalist Aslan Saparbaev for printing information about his criminal charges and the resulting fines. In December 2018, Saparbaev lost the court case and, along with Asia-News, was ordered to pay Keldibekov KGS 1 million (\$28,717); he intends to appeal in Bishkek City Court. Keldibekov also expressed intent to sue Atambayev for voicing false information about Keldibekov's corruption schemes during an interview on April.

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Regarding access to public information, Arykbaev said that it grew more difficult to receive responses from state bodies in 2018. For example, the Ministry of Justice no longer provides information about the founders of legal entities and companies' charter documents. "This made working on investigations, in which it is necessary to know the owners of legal entities, much more difficult; the register of court proceedings (act.sot.kg) works inconsistently and does not publish all judicial decisions; shorthand notes of Parliament meetings cannot be found in open access and are not released upon request, although this information is obviously of public interest and should be open," Arykbaev stated.

Usenova relayed that on October 29, 2018, a General Staff of Armed Forces of the Kyrgyz

Republic press conference denied attendance to a 24.kg journalist, Aida Jumashova, following an article she wrote that criticized the state body. The head of the press service maintained that they reserve the right to choose their journalists, but Usenova noted that the move is conflicts with national legislation and international agreements aimed at preventing government officials from denying media outlets and journalists access to information. She also called out weaknesses in the legislation related to access to information: Although it defines classified and sensitive information, the wording is vague and thus loosely interpreted by officials. For example, she said, Osh's mayor issued a regulation prohibiting city services from providing any information to the press without his approval.

Sadiev brought up the case of the prime minister's visit to Jalal-Abad oblast in December 2018. The prime minister asked a private television channel videographer to stop filming local deputies discussing the poor quality of roads and the failure of local authorities to address the issue. Sadiev also mentioned another case: In December, the chair and vice mayors at an Osh City Council committee meeting asked a T Media television and radio company journalist to leave. A panelist who wished to remain anonymous added that state-affiliated mass media enjoy an advantage in dealing with the state press services, such as in the mayor's office and the Department of Internal Affairs of Osh. Voronina mentioned that Bishkek City Council, which normally provides access to its meetings either in person or online, closed its meetings to journalists beginning last fall.

Moreover, several panelists noted the failure of government bodies to abide by the law on access to information's requirement that officials provide responses to written requests within two weeks. Arykbaev said that during Kloop's investigation into

⁵ "A Participant in the April Events Sued Askarbekov and Journalists," Kaktus Media. March 22, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/371991_ychastnik_aprelskih_sobytiy_podal_v_sydney_na_askarbekova_i_na_jurnalystov.html.

plagiarized dissertations among Kyrgyzstani officials, the Higher Attestation Commission took months to respond and did so only after Kloop filed an official complaint and threatened a lawsuit. Arykbaev said, however, that the lack of systematization of data in the state bodies is sometimes the real problem. For example, the state's environment and forestry agency delayed its reply for months but eventually asked Kloop Media to help sift through piles of paper documents to find the necessary answers.

Ismanov did not see a problem with access to local and international news for media outlets. On the contrary, he pointed out a different issue: because the audience also has access to local and foreign stories, local media outlets have to work that much harder to gain a lead in coverage of a story. "They do not use the full potential of the access to foreign media and publish stories when the audience already knows them in detail," Ismanov concluded.

However, some panelists mentioned that not all media outlets have clauses on using other media's materials. Usenova provided the example of Turmush.kg, an Internet-based news outlet that published photographs of Tobias Marschall without a proper citation. After Voronina pointed out the mistake on Facebook, the outlet corrected its mistake and credited the photographer.

Voronina remembered two cases involving the use of photos from foreign photographers without permission. AKIpress used photographs of Pamiri Kyrgyz by a Canadian photographer; Azattyk used a photograph by an Uzbekistani photographer, Elyor Nematov, on the topic of migration. Sanjar Eralliev, working for Azattyk-Osh, said that they received the photo from the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) press service, but he was contacted by a Sputnik Kyrgyzstan staff member who claimed that Azattyk used their photo without permission.

Upon realizing the mistake, Azattyk republished the article, including the photograph and the name of the photographer, in their publication. Arykbaev, however, mentioned Azattyk, along with Kaktus Media and 24.kg, as some of the few media outlets that set a trend of respecting intellectual property rights, while emphasizing that, generally, author's rights are not upheld by media in the country. Several panelists noted that Kloop.kg has become one of the few resources for fact-checking and flagging false information.

While entry into the journalism profession is not restricted or limited officially, as detailed earlier, officials sometimes curtail individual journalists' access to public events. And the panelists reported that many media outlets are urging journalists to move to a professional licensing system, but it is in response to financial issues, given poor advertising prospects. Makhinur Niyazova, correspondent with *ResPublika* newspaper, explained that having salaried employees is non-remunerative when a project amount is small and the company cannot cover social security taxes, forcing employees to buy licenses (called patents in Kyrgyzstan). Sadiev also noted the absence of such license categories as journalist and editor, compelling those professionals to buy licenses for video and audio recording or proofreading, which is a legal violation.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

1.99

Turning to the consideration of the professionalism of journalists, several panelists described reporters as mere "re-transmitters of information"—passing on information without checking reliability and putting speed over quality.

Panelists agreed that journalists do not use a wide spectrum of sources, favoring the views of the media owners. Usenova added that the state's hold on digital television's social package, which includes such channels as the state-owned KTRK channel family (news, sports, music, kids content), plays a negative role in the freedom of expression and access to a variety of information.

Overall, Arykbaev considered the quality of journalism poor. "It is not only those who write in the Kyrgyz language, as they say, but also those who represent the key online media outlets in the country—Kaktus Media, 24.kg, AKIpress, and Sputnik Kyrgyzstan," he said. He listed several fact-checking lapses to illustrate his point. For example, after Focus Economics stated that Kyrgyzstan is on the list of the top-10 poorest countries in the world, other outlets picked up the story without question—but his outlet, Kloop Media, questioned the study's methodology and found out that a number of developing countries, such as Afghanistan and Malawi, were not included in the study, calling its conclusions into question.⁶ Ismanov pointed to an example involving a *Vecherniy Bishkek* headline that indicated that some imams in Kyrgyzstan prohibit playing musical instruments, although the article itself contained information about Uzbekistan.

Niyazova agreed that in pursuit of flashy headlines, mass media stray from responsibility. Nevertheless, she stated, "I always debate myself about the headlines of my articles, because if I write headlines that fit all the ethics norms, nobody would read them." Another vice noted by Niyazova is publishing press releases and gathering

⁶ Khasanova, Saviya and Arykbaev, Eldiyar, "Fact Check: Kyrgyzstan Is in the Top 10 Poorest Countries in the World (in Fact, Not)," Kloop.kg. June 15, 2018. <https://kloop.kg/blog/2018/06/15/faktchek-kyrgyzstan-vhodit-v-top-10-bednejshih-stran-mira-na-samom-dele-net/>.

information on social media. Yet several panelists, including Niyazova, see evidence that fact-checking is improving for the media and social media communities, citing a new resource, factcheck.kg, established by the Media Development Center (with financial support from the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan). The website exposes fake stories in Kyrgyzstan and beyond, relying on the journalism ethics code and Kyrgyz legislation.⁷ Ydyrys Isakov, a regional reporter for Azattyk Media, tried to justify the poor quality of the materials among regional journalists by noting their lack of resources, experience, and training.

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).

Panelists agreed that most journalists are not aware of the existence, or content, of the journalism ethics code. The new Commission for the Examination of Complaints on Mass Media launched a “flash mob” on Facebook, asking tagged users to quote and interpret a passage from the ethics code. Although that brought the code to life for a short while, Niyazova said that both the commission’s decisions and the ethics code are advisory rather than mandatory and largely ignored. For example, Voronina could remember only a few television channels labeling their advertising material as public relations. Niyazova added that gifts are not a novelty for journalists; the president’s office gives them out to almost all media outlets on the Day of Information and Press.

Arykbaev said that Kloop has developed its own more detailed code of ethics, which prohibits gifts from any side of a conflict or paying for interviews or information and requires visible labeling of commercial material.

Voronina brought up a case illustrating an ethical challenge for the press. A reporter with the “TV Kaiguul” (Watch) program was filming traffic police who stopped a car with tinted glass windows, which are illegal in Kyrgyzstan. While the police were talking to the driver, a woman inside screamed for help. Neither the police nor the reporter helped the woman. Moreover, the press coverage emphasized the tinted glass window violation rather than the fact that the police and media representative failed to address cries for help.⁸ Among the panelists, only Voronina viewed the journalist’s failure to question the police’s negligence as an

ethical violation.

When journalists cover stories on suspected criminals, they do not blur faces despite the fact that their guilt is yet to be proven; the same goes for victims of crime. Not only are their faces shown but also vivid photos of injuries are published without warning.

Some of the panelists agreed that lawsuits fuel self-censorship. They pointed to the removal of a Wikipedia article titled “The Corrupt Clan of the Matraimovs,”⁹ which relayed alleged links between mafia and Kyrgyzstan officials. Azamat Tynaev, an Internews content consultant, commented that several online news outlets removed articles about Matraimovs—and the payment for such a “service” reaches \$15,000. Arykbaev, however, said that Kloop Media, which also published an article on the topic, received a phone call from Matraimov’s sister asking them to remove the article along with other mentions of children of rich politicians, but no money was offered (Kloop refused).

Religion is one topic that journalists generally prefer to avoid—especially, Sadiev said, corruption in religious institutions, the state of religious education in Kyrgyzstan, and the construction of new mosques. Eraliev and Voronina also listed top politicians, mass media owners, the LGBTIQ community, and sexual health among the taboo topics.

Eraliev relayed that earlier in 2018, he wrote about early marriages and interviewed young wives in Jalal-Abad and Nookan. Consequently, the police paid him a visit; he later learned that local mullahs threatened his family. He filed a complaint, but the police refused to investigate. Although the

7 “Factcheck—a New Developing Resource in Kyrgyzstan,” Factcheck.kg. November 2018. <http://factcheck.kg/ru/post/123>.

8 “The Girl Shouted in a Tinted Car, but the Traffic Police Did Not React. What Is Known?” Kaktus Media. December 9, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/383687/devyshka_krichala_v_tonirovannom_avto_no_sotrydniki_gyobdd_ne_reagirovali_chno_izvestno.html.

9 “An Article about the ‘Corrupt Clan of the Matraimovs’ Appeared in Wikipedia,” Kaktus Media. December 10, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/383750_v_vikipedii_poiavilas_statia_pro_korruptcionnyy_klan_matraimovyh.html.

mullahs eventually apologized, with the help of the muftiat, Eraliev still feels pressure, especially on his family. He added that after writing several pieces about people who underwent gender confirmation surgeries in 2017, he himself was stigmatized by his colleagues, who pressed him on why he would cover such cases and questioned his “normalcy.” Now, he chooses to avoid such stories.

Tynaev believes that journalists resort to “selling their services in the interests of political parties and certain political leaders, and centers of political or religious influence because there are no civilized business models in mass media, nor instruments of crowdfunding.”

Media salaries are lower than those in other white-collar sectors, ranging from KGS 10,000 to KGS 15,000 (\$145–\$215) a month, which the panelists say does not foster financial security. The exceptions are journalists working for Azattyk and the Russia-funded Sputnik. Salaries in the regional media outlets are much lower than in the capital: editors are paid approximately KGS 2,500 (\$36) and journalists KGS 1,500 (\$15) a month.

Salaries of journalists working for state-owned media remain low and tend to attract early career journalists or those who cannot leave for other reasons. The state dictates the personnel policy and does not allow for the reduction of superfluous staff. Journalists are forced to work for several media outlets or find additional sources of income to make a living. Some transition to other fields or even move abroad as labor migrants.

Tynaev believes that journalists resort to “selling their services in the interests of political parties and

certain political leaders, and centers of political or religious influence because there are no civilized business models in mass media, nor instruments of crowdfunding.” Niyazova pointed out that some media outlets receive funding from international organizations and NGOs. For instance, Internews provides many grant opportunities, but most of the funding “goes to cover technical support; the salaries remain below average.” Usenova mentioned that Internews helped the new online talk show *Govori*. TV purchase equipment. Despite isolated success stories, one panelist mentioned the absence of labor contracts as another widespread problem that journalists encounter. It leaves them without social security, leave allowances, and at a disadvantage when it comes to negotiating payment terms for professional fees. Ismanov mentioned Yntymak, which used to receive international donor support but is technically a public media. Its employees went without pay from August 2017–February 2018 while the finance ministry held up its budget approval, driving many journalists to quit.

Despite the presence of many channels dedicated entirely to entertainment content, such as KTRK and now the EITR channel families, which offer sports and music programming, panelists do not feel that entertainment content prevails over news, especially when it comes to locally-produced television. Talk shows usually discuss political news; entertainment talk shows are rare. Voronina mentioned that Internews supports multimedia storytelling programs on local television. Sadiev explained that media outlets do not have the funds to produce such programs, and a lack of journalists skilled in the medium is another obstacle.

Adel Laisheva, director of the Center of Media Communications at Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television Corporation, noted that audience preferences still lean toward entertainment, pointing

to the popular *Super Info* entertainment newspaper. She also suggested that private and state-owned mass media outlets cover the same news but with a different angle, while quality analytical pieces are rare.

The local Expert Consultancy Agency study of television media conducted in January 2018,¹⁰ analyzing the content of 20 television channels belonging both to the social and commercial channel packages, confirmed that while there are several channels dedicated entirely to entertainment content—such as KTR Music, TV1, NBT, Pyatnitsa, and Semeinyi—the most popular television channels allocate a fair amount of time to news.¹¹ State-owned EITR and KTRK dedicate a majority of their time to news, followed by NTV and NTS. Nevertheless, even periodic studies on media consumption do not offer a realistic distribution of shares of entertainment and news content. It is not clear whether talk shows that touch on politics, for instance, are classified as entertainment or current events.

Panelists agreed that media outlets in Bishkek have adequate equipment, unlike their colleagues in the regions. “How can one speak of convergence journalism in the regions when not all regional mass media have modern equipment or can afford to provide their employees with Internet access for a reasonable price? On top of that, there is a lack of computer literacy and cybersecurity,” commented

10 Eshenalieva, Ainura, “Analysis of Video Content and Language of Broadcasting Channels of Kyrgyzstan,” Media Policy Institute. March 13, 2018. <http://www.media.kg/research/analiz-video-kontenta-i-yazyka-veshchaniya-telekanalov-kyrgyzstana/>.

11 “Survey ‘Media Preferences of the Population of Kyrgyzstan,’ 8th Wave, 2017,” Internews in Kyrgyzstan. December 14, 2017. <http://internews.kg/glavnye-novosti/issledovanie-mediapredpochteniya-naseleniya-kyrgyzstana-8-ya-volna-2017-god/>.

one panelist. Many reporters in Bishkek and in other regions tend to depend on smartphones with decent cameras.

Kyrgyzstan ranks behind many of its neighbors in Internet speed.¹² Ismanov noted that Internet speed in the regions is adequate for individual work, but not so much for the work of a television company.

Panelists agreed that specialized reporting is underdeveloped, and media outlets neglect quality for the sake of quantity and speed. Several panelists also pointed out the lack of coverage of topics, including the economy and ecology. As Tynaev explained, “The remuneration scheme in media outlets does not provide an incentive for journalists to focus on certain topics, because that would be time-consuming and require constant qualifications upgrade.” Another panelist added that authors do not always feel safe, considering the consequences of a journalistic investigation.

However, almost all the panelists mentioned investigative journalism pieces, particularly those conducted by Kloop Media, in 2018. One investigation that made a big splash on social media uncovered plagiarism in the dissertations of Kyrgyzstani public figures; some were stripped of their degrees as a result.

Arykbaev said that Kloop aims to develop new branches of journalism at their school, including data journalism, data visualization and analysis, and journalistic investigations. He noted that there is a lack of specialized professionals in the country, which is why they had to invite one from Ukraine.

Regarding requirements that television

channels provide a set amount of Kyrgyz language and locally produced content, Voronina highlighted the lack of regulation and monitoring from the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism. Other panelists agreed that locally-produced content cannot compete with rampant broadcasting of pirated content on several television channels and local streaming websites. Yet the channels specializing in rebroadcasting, staffed with just a few employees, have as much claim to the advertising pie as channels shouldering significantly higher staff, equipment, and content production expenses. Local television channels responded by establishing the Association of Television and Radio Organizations, chaired by panelist Jainak Usen uulu, director of NTS TV and Radio Company, with the central goal of demanding the observance of legislation and monitoring from the responsible state body. Moreover, members of the association will demand the inclusion of locally-produced content in the public procurement of social services. Voronina, however, warned that the public procurement is done via a tender, which requires giving the order to the lowest bidder—which she said would result in low-quality content.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

2.13

According to the Media Policy Institute’s 2018 survey on media literacy in Kyrgyzstan,¹³ television remains the main source of political

information for residents, with 94 percent of respondents citing it as their primary source. About 75 percent said they watch it every day. While 71.8 percent reported access to the Internet, most access it via smartphones.

Social networking sites and apps are also popular in Kyrgyzstan; the report cites 1,000,000 users of Instagram and 700,000 users each for Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and V Kontakte. The study also revealed that young people prefer to consume news in an entertainment format via social networking sites by looking at pictures and short videos—a notion backed by the popularity of Instagram-based news outlets, such as News.kg, with over 600,000 subscribers, and omks_video (which hosts “One Million Kyrgyz Stories”), an entertainment page, with more than 800,000 subscribers. Niyazova mentioned that many mass media outlets established their channels on Telegram messenger, where they publish news. She also noted the appearance of a new format: one-liner news.

Formally, there are no restrictions on access to information via various sources, the panelists agreed. However, media preferences and media literacy leave much to be desired. Several panelists, including Sadiev and Ismanov, noted the rise of fake news in Kyrgyzstan. The study also raised concerns over the media literacy of Kyrgyzstani audiences. Many respondents, especially those older than 52, had difficulties distinguishing facts from the opinions they read.

Ismanov underlined the importance of popular messenger apps, such as WhatsApp, in sharing news—including, unfortunately, fake and provocative news, such as videos about interethnic conflicts that took place in 2010.

Several newly registered television channels have appeared as well: Aprel, openly owned

¹² “Kyrgyzstan Is Lagging Behind Uzbekistan, Armenia and Azerbaijan in Access to the Internet,” Kaktus Media. October 21, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/380739_kyrgyzstan_otstaet_po_dostypu_k_internetu_ot_uzbekistana_armenii_i_azerbaydjana.html.

¹³ Usenova, Begaim, “IMP Publishes a Report on the Results of a Study of the Level of Media Literacy in Kyrgyzstan,” Media Policy Institute. February 2, 2018. <http://www.media.kg/news/imp-publikuet-otchet-po-itogam-issledovaniya-urovnya-mediagramotnosti-v-kyrgyzstane/>.

by Atambayev; NewTV; and the Internet-based GovoriTV. Several YouTube channels received recognition for reaching 100,000 subscribers: SuperKG, OshTV channels, and Chubak Aji Jalilov, former head of Kyrgyzstan's Muslim Spiritual Authority.

“For instance, if Uzbeks in Osh do not see [representatives of their ethnicity] on KTRK, if they are edited out, what will they do? They will turn to other channels—Russian, Uzbekistani ones.”

Aprel has taken on the function of a watchdog, providing a critical perspective on the state and public administration. While state-affiliated television channels continued the tradition of obsequious coverage and minimizing the government's failures, Aprel, along with some moderately positioned channels such as NTS, offered alternative political views. Thus, after the dismissal of Prime Minister Isakov, imprisoned for corruption charges, Aprel was the only channel that invited him for an interview and gave him a platform. Nevertheless, Sadiev remains optimistic that television's switch to digital broadcasting, which improved coverage and access to a wider array of channels, will lead to improvements.

The Ministry of Justice has closed open access to the mass media registry, making it difficult to assess access to local and foreign media. Nonetheless, a number of foreign media outlets are very popular in Kyrgyzstan: the Russian-funded convergence media outlet Sputnik, the Kazakhstani NBT TV channel, and Chinese and Turkish media outlets, as well as the Russian Channel One, which remains on the first button of the remote control

and is included in the social multiplex along with the Russian RTR and Mir channels. Local and foreign media work on equal terms, with the exception that foreign reporters must undergo accreditation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Foreign ownership of mass media is limited to 65 percent of shares under the mass media law, creating the grounds for parliamentarian Tazabek Ikramov to suggest citizenship checks of all mass media owners and heads in a December 2018 parliamentary meeting.¹⁴ Ikramov expressed concern that foreign-owned media impose foreign values on the Kyrgyzstani people.

Eraliev said that the only foreign offerings from digital television packages are Russian channels, which offer a one-sided view. The report on media literacy revealed that close to 40 percent of respondents to the Media Policy Institute's survey on media literacy do not trust foreign media, although it varies by region.

However, panelists did not report legal or technical issues with access to local and international news, although Laisheva said the lack of knowledge of foreign languages constitutes a barrier.

Ismanov also noted the unstable provision of television channels in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan, where three channels became inaccessible for a short period of time because of a damaged cable. The main hindrance to digital television access, however, is cost. Approximately 300 settlements do not have digital signal transmitters; the residents were advised to buy satellite antennas that cost KGS 3,500–6,000 (\$50–86)—too expensive for many. Ismanov also

noted that the offer of new Internet tariffs has improved access to the Internet in the regions.

There are no studies on the comprehensiveness of coverage of political life in the country and any political bias of mass media. The panelists did not address charges that mass media do not serve the public interest—a concern not reflected in the public or in Kyrgyzstan's legislation either. The panelists feel that events covered by state-owned media present the news from whatever angle flatters the state.

In Kyrgyzstan, the concept that local news is dying out has just recently surfaced. Only a few media outlets reflect life in the regions and remote areas—for example, Turmush.kg (AKIpress's thematic website), which only offers anecdotal stories, not analytical pieces. Residents of the regions do not have representation in mass media, nor do they influence the media agenda. Eraliev said ethnic minorities are rarely shown on television, which, in his opinion, results in their lack of trust toward mass media.

He believes that the concept of local information agencies is disappearing in Kyrgyzstan as well. Rather than generating news and spreading it among news outlets, agencies now compete with other news outlets. Niyazova noted that AKIpress, 24.kg, and Kabar call themselves information agencies, but do not provide information to other mass media. Rather, they publish the news and provide open access. Only branches of international media outlets use international information agencies; local media outlets cannot afford them.

According to the panelists, private media outlets are understaffed and underfunded, making it difficult for them to produce their own content. Panelists referred to the outcome as “press release journalism,” when media materials heavily rely on the opinions of politicians and press releases shared

14 “Tazabek Ikramov Decided to Check the Citizenship of the Founders of the Media,” Kaktus Media, December 13, 2018. https://kaktus.media/doc/383908_tazabek_ikramov_resnil_proverit_grajdanstvo_ychrediteley_smi.html.

by state institutions. Furthermore, radio channels and smaller online media outlets are no longer the only outlets resorting to rebroadcasting news feeds gathered from such information agencies as AKIpress, Kabar, and 24.kg. Even large and experienced television channels, such as Piramida, one of the first private channels to produce its own news, have omitted news programming altogether.¹⁵ Several television channels, such as KTRK, EITR, and NTS, are building up their capacity to produce their own news and analytical programs, but the new and former regional channels that entered the commercial multiplex are still struggling in that respect.

According to the panelists, coverage of local news in the regions is insufficient. The information agency Kabar, which used to cover news of local significance, no longer does so. A new private radio station JashFM in Isfana was established in January 2017, and Voronina mentioned community media outlets established on the local level in seven municipalities with the support of USAID. Apart from that, panelists did not note new media in the regions.

There is no reliable media ownership information available to the public, with just a few exceptions. Most notably, Aprel openly claims a high-ranking politician, Atambayev, as its sole owner. Panelists noted a few other channels whose owners are known to the public, such as Govor. TV, established by journalist Katya Urumkanova, and NextTV channel, which does not hide the fact that it was established by Ravshan Jeenbekov, a former parliamentarian. Knowledge of ownership of

other outlets is speculative: For instance, tracing the ownership of Kalys Media to parliamentarian Janar Akaev and of NTS to former presidential candidate Omurbek Babanov. The panelists revealed that even media experts struggle to name media outlet owners.

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.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.

Information sources in the languages of ethnic minorities are very limited. Sadiev noted just two multilingual television and radio companies—Yntymak and NurTV—that offer information in Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek. Radio Dostuk also offers programs in minority languages. Uzbek-language newspapers, including *Ush Sadosi*, *Jalalabot Tongi*, and *Dustlik*, are still more or less popular. The

Uzbek-language *Akhborot*, which was relaunched in 2017, is mainly focused on education and distributed in educational institutions. Media Policy Institute's media literacy study revealed that there is a gap between the supply and demand of information provided in the Uzbek language, but Sadiev mentioned that the lack of content in the Uzbek language is balanced by access to Uzbekistani channels that became available with digital satellite television.

Eraliev pointed out the lack of ethnic representation on one state-owned KTRK channel, which, according to him, mainly shows ethnic Kyrgyz: "For instance, if Uzbeks in Osh do not see [representatives of their ethnicity] on KTRK, if they are edited out, what will they do? They will turn to other channels—Russian, Uzbekistani ones."

It is primarily Bishkek-based media that cover national and international news. When it comes to local media outlets, according to one panelist, editors make a conscious decision not to reflect issues and problems of local significance in order to avoid confrontation with the authorities—preventing local journalists from writing about anything of importance. While discussing the lack of regional newspapers, some panelists, including Ismanov, noted a new threat to their existence: a multi-ministry initiative to reorganize local print media, including shutting down all regional state-owned newspapers and turning them into media centers. The organization of the proposed media centers is unclear, but the panelists said that local journalists did not embrace the idea of reorganization, which was subsequently postponed indefinitely.

¹⁵ "The Video Series 'Analysis of Video Content and Language of Broadcasting Channels of Kyrgyzstan,'" Expert Consulting Agency. January 2018. <http://www.expert.kg/ru/monitoring/180>.

**OBJECTIVE 4:
BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT**

1.59

The panelists do not see private media outlets in Kyrgyzstan as business enterprises, nor do they believe that media are profitable. They lack business and management strategies, as well as staff dedicated to these purposes. Mainly, outlets make money for *jeansa* journalism (i.e., hidden advertising, public relations (PR) stunts, and “black PR”). Arykbaev said that media try to diversify their sources of income with crowdfunding, grants, and commercial projects. However, Ismanov and Tynaev noted that crowdfunding is unpopular among audiences.

As in previous years, panelists named the state-funded OTRK and foreign-funded Azattyk and Sputnik Kyrgyzstan as financially viable; however, there is no reliable data to back that impression.

Three private newspapers shut down in November for lack of funds: *Fabula*, *Tamchy*, and *Allo reklama*, which specializes in advertising. The head of the printing department of the Media Support Center that printed the newspapers said that with the trend toward online outlets, newspaper circulation has decreased by 30–35 percent over the past few years. The mass media law requires print media to state its readership circulation on every publication, but many newspapers fail to do so, making it difficult for the public to assess the scale of print media consumption. Media Support Center is the only publishing house that states circulations. The most recent print media content and circulation monitoring took place in 2015.

Internews representatives in Kyrgyzstan selected a number of media outlets to undergo organizational diagnostics and receive financial aid

for organizational development. Over the course of 2018, these outlets underwent trainings on launching sales departments and monetizing media products. A number of trainings were dedicated to media management. Panelists present at the training noted that many media outlets representatives were calculating the costs of program production and breakeven points for the first time. Several panelists, including Voronina and Sadiev, believe that these interventions are crucial for building the management capacity of media outlets and will bear fruit in the next few years. However, only six organizations won the competition to attend—three in Bishkek and three in the regions. Sadiev noted that other similar events organized by Internews lacked representatives of regional mass media.

As in previous years, the panelists said that subsidies from obscure owners constitute the main source of income of private media outlets. While panelists believe that advertising is scarce, other experts suggested that the market for digital advertising is growing.

The Expert Consultancy Agency's annual study in 2018 suggested that the volume of television advertising amounted to \$17.2 million, 4.4 percent higher than last year, while radio advertising climbed nearly 30 percent to \$3.5 million.¹⁶

The leaders in terms of ad budget are KTR (12 percent of the total television ad budget within the studied period), followed by NBT and OshTV (10 percent). The top-three radio stations included Evropa+ (25 percent of the total radio ad budget within the studied period), trailed by Avtoradio and Kyrgyzstan Obondoru. However, the study authors warned that these are only estimates, as they used

¹⁶ “Volume of Television and Radio Segment in 2018 in Kyrgyzstan,” Expert Consulting Agency. 2018. <http://www.expert.kg/ru/monitoring/195>.

the official price lists of the channels, while in reality, significant discounts are provided.

Panelists tended to distrust the Expert Consultancy Agency's research, however, and believe it is difficult to estimate the volume of the advertising market, which most of the panelists agreed is shrinking for all media outlets. With the appearance of a variety of channels in digital packages ranging from those striving to produce their own content to those who merely retransmit foreign content or pirated content, the pricing policies vary significantly and highlight an absence of standards in the share of advertising profits in the overall income of mass media.

State-owned mass media enjoy an advantage over private media, says Sadiev, because the state covers their salary expenses and broadcasting fees, allowing them to lower their ad prices.

Usenova noted the appearance of Internet-based promotion services, such as targeted advertising, Search Engine Optimization (SEO)-promotion, and social media marketing, which suggests that advertising on the Internet is gaining popularity. Among media outlets that can sustain themselves on advertising revenue, Niyazova named AKIpress and Kaktus Media, but that is not based on evidence.

Tynaev brought up the issue of media outlets trying to provide attractive advertising products on their own, as “they do not have staff copywriters and designers who could produce creative advertising. They do not develop business models and business strategies; they cannot offer the clients anything new, but rely on old, traditional advertising formats.”

The lack of reliable information about media management and media funding streams, including a lack of donor interest in media outlets outside of Bishkek and traditional media outlets, may explain why the panelists feel that advertising profits are narrowing. The list of Internews grant winners in 2018¹⁷ includes a wide array of actors and newly established media, as well as very few traditional media outlets.

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.

A few advertising agencies dominate the private advertising market, including Quattro Media and Qausar, which work with large media outlets—mainly

television and radio. There are no reliable data about the volume of the advertising market, but Usen uulu speculated that it is approximately \$6–\$7 million, while Usenova believes it is about \$9 million. According to the law on advertising, television and radio channels that do not specialize in advertising cannot sell more than 25 percent of their broadcast time; television channels studied by the Expert Consultancy Agency in 2018, at least, appear far from reaching that threshold.

Usen uulu emphasized the problem created by the arrival of digital television. Currently, 60 channels compete for a fairly small advertising market, which has led to widespread dumping prices and further deflation of the market. He pointed to television channels specializing in pirated content as the main threat to the media's survival. It is difficult for channels to produce their own content, staff their companies, and buy expensive equipment to compete with television channels that stream pirated content with just a few staff members and no other expenses. According to the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, half of the content broadcast between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. and between 6:00 p.m. and 11 p.m. must be locally produced. However, according to the Expert Consulting Agency study, on average, the 20 monitored channels broadcast only 31 percent local content—42 percent of the content is in Russian and another 25 percent is foreign.¹⁸ Outside of those time slots, some channels significantly decrease the broadcasting of local content, and others broadcast none at all. Only a few channels, such as KTR, KTR-sport, KTR-Musyka, NTS, and EITR meet the standards required by the law.

Despite the results of the studies and the impressions of the panelists about the growth of the advertising market, the chair of the Chamber of Tax Consultants public association, Tatiana Kim, claimed that the ad market is shrinking. She suggested that international companies and social networking sites, such as Google, Yandex, and Facebook, should pay value-added tax in Kyrgyzstan because they receive direct payments for advertising from Kyrgyzstani users.¹⁹ Such “Google taxes” were introduced in Russia and Belarus in 2016 and 2017.

When it comes to regional media, Sadiev noted that they are not in a position to dictate prices to advertising agencies and cannot work directly with large advertisers, and thus rely on the pricing policies of Bishkek-based advertising agencies.

State-owned mass media enjoy an advantage over private media, says Sadiev, because the state covers their salary expenses and broadcasting fees, allowing them to lower their ad prices. Nevertheless, state funding is used as a point of pressure and manipulation by the government. When it comes to non-state-funded media outlets, Tynaev believes that the share of advertising placed by the state is so small that it does not contribute significantly to their profits. Moreover, some state-owned mass media, such as *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, do not receive any state funding, which drives the outlets into debt to pay the printing houses.

There are several private companies, including M-Vektor (a research company), Expert Consultancy Agency, and Siar-Bishkek, that regularly publish the results of their media studies on television channel ratings, advertising market volume, and audience

17 Eshenalieva, Ainura, “Internews: 15 Recipients for Content Production Identified,” Media Policy Institute. May 15, 2018 <http://www.media.kg/news/opredeleny-15-poluchatelej-grantov-na-proizvodstvo-kontenta/>.

18 “Analysis of Video Content and Language of Broadcasting Channels of Kyrgyzstan,” Expert Consulting Agency. January 2018. <http://www.expert.kg/ru/monitoring/180>.

19 “Google Tax: Why Don’t Google, YouTube, Facebook, Yandex and a Number of Search Engines and Instant Messengers Pay Kyrgyzstan?” Tazabek. March 22, 2018. <http://www.tazabek.kg/www.tazabek.kg/news:1438303?f=cp>.

preferences. However, every year, panelists express their doubts about the data's reliability.

The panelists did not believe that media outlets apply strategic planning to increase their revenue and say they rarely refer to research data to attract advertising. One of the reasons is a lack of trust in the data; the other reason, Sadiev said, is that content production relies heavily on the owner's agenda.

According to Niyazova, Google Analytics remains the go-to tool to measure Internet traffic, along with Yandex.Metrika, which the panelists report is gaining popularity. Sadiev, however, noted that many online sites hide their visitor statistics, using them only for internal purposes. Niyazova hopes that the situation will change with the introduction of Peplemeters in 2019.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

2.17

Business associations in print media, although technically present, do not effectively represent the interests of mass media owners. Despite the Association of Publishers and Distributors of Print Media's revival two years ago, it has made little progress on stemming flagging newspaper circulations and high paper prices.

Digital Technologies LLC, headed by Usen uulu, established with the introduction of digital television, unites 22 private television and radio stations and is dedicated to widening the digital signal delivery network to the residents of all regions.

In addition, a new association of television and radio broadcasters, the Association of Television and Radio Organizations, was established in September

2018; it unites nine television channels under the mission of demanding the application of Kyrgyzstani legislation related to television and radio content and broadcast language. The laws on broadcasting and advertising are designed to promote the production of original content and to protect local television channels from competition with channels specializing in rebroadcasting foreign content.

The chair of the association, Usen uulu, said that its working group sent a written request to the Ministry of Culture, Information, and Tourism to speed up the execution of the Law on TV and Radio Broadcasting and to take measures in relation to those channels that violate the law and present pirated content. The Ministry asked all channels to provide copies of all content broadcasted over three days; a majority of the channels ignored the request. The association pressed the issue, but the Ministry published a press release that claimed it lacked the manpower to monitor video content. Usen uulu does not see the excuse as justified, as the Republican Production Association of Radio-Relay Lines of Television and Radio Broadcasting (RPO RMTR), a branch of the state-owned Kyrgyztelecom tasked with signal delivery of the channels in the social digital package, has a department dedicated to monitoring television and radio content. "They have RPO RMTR with a monitoring center; they have Kyrgyztelecom with an army of employees; there is the state Department of Information and Communication, which are actually responsible for the sphere," observed Usen uulu. Nevertheless, it is private research agencies—Expert Consultancy Agency and TNS—that end up conducting the monitoring and revealing which channels do not follow the broadcasting regulations stipulated by law. The panelists believed that it is still too early to see whether the association will bring about change.

Despite the numerous lawsuits against media

and journalists, the two main professional associations, the Union of Journalists and the Independent Union of Journalists, remain inactive. Panelists could not name any notable cases of professional associations standing up for their colleagues in the past year. Voronina believes that solidarity among journalists is weaker than solidarity between media and human rights activists when it comes to representation and protection of journalists' rights.

Sadiev noted that in the regions, universities do not uphold educational standards, nor do they try to incorporate new technologies and media tools. Journalism students generally graduate lacking practical experience because there are no modern labs and equipment.

Media Policy Institute remains one of the few NGOs that provide legal protection to journalists encountering lawsuits for their work, but, as mentioned by its director, Usenova, it is understaffed and struggles to process all the cases. Last year, the work of the legal clinic Adilet, which represents the rights of journalists, stalled while its director, Cholpon Jakupova, numbered among the defendants in the *Atambayev vs. Zanoza.kg* case. As soon as the case was dropped, Adilet got back on track. Another organization mentioned by panelists was the legal company Precedent, which provides consultations and legal expertise, and takes on cases related to freedom of speech. Arykbaev noted that these organizations are concentrated in Bishkek, but there are similar organizations dealing with cases in the regions, such as Ventus in Issyk-Kul oblast.

The panelists noted that Internews Kyrgyzstan provided a number of activities and opportunities

in 2018. Their training and funding opportunities are aimed at supporting the development of local mass media, access to information, and cooperation of mass media and civil society on issues of transparency and accountability. In April 2018, Internews organized the first “Media Tootoo” forum, which offered a platform for local journalists across the country to discuss new media developments. The presentations and panel discussions included journalists and media experts from Central Asia, as well as Russia, Ukraine, and the USA, and the Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan supported the participation of journalists from the regions.

The Industrial Media Committee, an association of legal entities established in 2011, underwent a revival and grew more prominent in 2018 during the Media Tootoo forum. The association stands for the development of the media sphere through research of the media market and broadening of the advertising field.

It is notable that NGOs have expanded their scope beyond building the capacity of journalists and media outlets to building the media literacy and critical thinking skills of the population. The Media Support Center, for example, launched Media Sabak, a project aimed at students and building a network of teachers in the three southern oblasts.

Although seven universities offer journalism as a major, the panelists unanimously said that the quality of higher education in journalism leaves much to be desired. For example, there are no graduate-level journalism programs. This year, Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (KRSU) students launched a flash mob on social media with the hashtag “I am not afraid to say,” raising issues, including cold, unsuitable facilities; outdated teaching materials and curriculum; and a lack of courses that would help students become convergence journalists.

Voronina and Arykbaev, who both teach journalism at universities, said that they have received complaints from their students about the quality of education. Voronina also noted that the 45 seats allocated for first-year students this year were filled with 80 newcomers, suggesting that journalism as a profession is in demand. Several panelists noted that KRSU and AUCU graduates are still above average, but most panelists assessed Manas University graduates as the most adequately trained. Eraliev confirmed that Azattyk is usually satisfied with their writing skills and level of education.

Sadiev noted that in the regions, universities do not uphold educational standards, nor do they try to incorporate new technologies and media tools. Journalism students generally graduate lacking practical experience because there are no modern labs and equipment. Usen uulu believes that the majority of recent graduates have to be retrained upon hiring.

Short-term courses offered by a number of organizations help meet these needs, ranging from the beginner to more specialized levels. Kloop.kg continues to offer beginner’s courses in Bishkek and Osh, mainly attended by high school and university students in their first years of study. The media school Yntymak, established in 2016 and affiliated with Yntymak public broadcaster, also offers courses on the foundations of journalism and new multimedia tools. Television channels, such as NTS, offer specialized courses for television hosts as well.

In 2018, Internews broadened its short-term journalism training opportunities by introducing courses on fact-checking, data journalism, and hosting talk shows. It is also conducting a number of projects and competitions aimed at original content production, increasing media profits via improved business practices, and audience research. Other organizations offer thematic courses and topics

linked to current events; such courses are usually offered by the NGOs specializing in a certain topic or within donor programs that are trying to improve journalists’ knowledge in their field of work. The School of Peacebuilding and Media Technologies in Central Asia, with the support of the Democracy Commission of the US Embassy, offered training on preventing extremism and propaganda in media. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting is implementing a project to help Central Asian researchers improve their skills in writing analytical pieces on the region for mass media. Kyrgyz-language course offerings are limited; panelists mentioned only trainings by the NGO Journalists, which provides training for Kyrgyz-speaking journalists.

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.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Private printing houses may serve as an instrument of political pressure and fight for property redistribution. Thus, the printing house belonging to *Vecherniy Bishkek*, along with the advertising company Rubikon, underwent yet more turnover in November 2018 as its former owner, Aleksandr Ryabushkin, was jailed for abuse of authority and causing property damage to the newspaper's former owner, Aleksandr Kim, who lost the newspaper to Ryabushkin in 2014. Given the unstable situation concerning the company's ownership, rumors about the printing house shutting down began floating around, which the newspaper contradicted in print.

When it comes to broadcast media, since 2017 state-owned Kyrgyztelecom company is not the only distributor of channels via RPO RMTQ, as Digital Technologies also began delivering signals. The number of transmitting stations increased in 2018 to 23 across the country, up from eight in just the main cities. The director of Digital Technologies, Usen uulu, shared that modernizing its equipment and increasing coverage to 90 percent of the country has led to increased expenses, which has turned out to be unaffordable for some of the channels. As a result, the modernization process has stalled for now. Usen uulu noted that the main expenses for private television channels are signal delivery and broadcasting, which is mainly done through RPO RMTR. As the tariffs for maintenance and renting masts are constantly increasing, it becomes too expensive for some channels, leading to the restriction of broadcasting zones or even disconnection from broadcasting.

Regarding the transmission of television channels via cable television providers, Usen uulu said that Aknet, one of the main cable television providers, is rumored to set very high prices for including a channel in its package. Other channels, such as TNS, however, reach agreements with such

providers via bartering for ad placement on their channels. Some Internet providers, such as Megaline Smart, deliver signals for some channels where they have coverage: Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Issyk-Kul.

The panelists did not note any issues with access to the Internet in Bishkek or the regions. They credited Kazakhstani OI, a new Internet provider, with expanding online access to the regions. Nevertheless, one regional panelist said the regions still suffer from a lack of provider choice, problems with the quality, and issues with the cost of the Internet—as well as power cuts.

Drone video recording and photography is gaining popularity among journalists. While most media outlets cannot afford them, some production studios offer them for rent. Internews, for example, supported the purchase of a 360-degree virtual reality camera, which the grantees used to create a photo and video series titled "Disappearing Kyrgyzstan," which is dedicated to raising awareness about Kyrgyzstan's environmental problems.

List of Panel Participants

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The following participant submitted a questionnaire but did not attend the panel discussion.

Sahira Nazarova, reporter, Eho Osha, Osh

Ydyrys Isakov, regional reporter, Azattyk Media, Osh

Daniyar Sadiev, director, Media School named after T. Tursunaliyev, Osh

Jainak Usen uulu, director, NTS; chairman, Digital Technologies LLC; chairman, Association of Television and Radio Organizations

Moderator and Author

Gulnara Ibraeva, media analyst, Bishkek

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