

MASS MEDIA**FRAMING THE TURKMENBASHI:
WESTERN PRESS PORTRAYALS OF
THE LATE PRESIDENT OF
TURKMENISTAN**

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Statement of the Problem

Studies have found that U.S. and other Western news media now devote less newspaper space, airtime, and financial and staff resources than in the past to foreign news, particularly news unrelated to ongoing wars in which the United States is engaged. That means more competition among “foreign” stories to get into print or onto the air, with editors and news directors exercising their professional judgment in selecting among competing offerings. With novelty among the widely accepted standard news values, it is no surprise that a story about a quirky foreign ruler such as the late president of Turkmenistan, or unusual law or governmental policy may edge out more “serious” stories in that competition for attention.

Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov, who died on 21 December, 2006, clearly fit the definition of a quirky, idiosyncratic, and authoritarian ruler. This study examines how three Western news organizations framed Niyazov during a one-year period and how they reported to their readers and audiences about Turkmenistan, specifically the prevalence of personal references to, and personalizing terminology about, the self-described “Turkmenbashi.” Finally, it discusses the im-

plications of such media framing for Western understanding of Turkmenistan and its issues, and the consequence that readers lose the opportunity to become informed about serious public policy issues that may directly or indirectly affect them and their own country in such matters as economics, security, politics, human rights, public health, energy, the environment, development, and religious and cultural movements.

Turkmenistan: Problems and Resources

Despite its potential wealth as a petro-state from natural gas and oil reserves, the country faces major economic, social, and health problems. According to a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency assessment, "Overall prospects in the near future are discouraging because of widespread internal poverty, a poor educational system, government misuse of oil and gas revenues, and Ashghabad's unwillingness to adopt market-oriented reforms."¹ The secretive nature of the government has made it tough to accurately gauge such challenges, however; N. Badykova observed, "It is difficult to assess Turkmenistan's economic situation. Official statistics are inflated two-three times to glorify (the) existing regime. The overall fiscal position of (the) Government is unknown because much of its revenue and expenditure is challenged through extra-budgetary funds and off-budget accounts."² In their study of the country's energy exports, V. Ginsburg and M. Troschke referred to an "information vacuum" that created contradictory opinions about the national economy, including conflicts between official and international organization statistics.³ There have been economic repercussions, such as the World Bank's refusal to provide new loans because the country has failed to report its external debt and meet minimum public resource management standards; in fact, the World Bank acknowledged that "unfortunately, there is little to show in terms of results" from loans and policy advice it previously provided.⁴ And N. Graham noted that the country has made only a limited departure from its "old, centrally planned economy" of the Soviet era.⁵

More than money is at stake. Badykova wrote, "Under the current irrational and corrupt political system, Turkmenistan's rich energy resources are more a curse than a blessing. Turkmenistan's high income from its gas exports permits its government to remain aloof from international organizations, to completely ignore the need for reforms and to isolate the country from the rest of the world."⁶ R. Burnashev and I. Chernykh said the country follows the premise that its main military danger comes from possible local wars and armed conflicts in neighboring countries, while Turkmenistan is involved in disputes with its neighbors over water-sharing (Uzbekistan), land borders (Kazakhstan), and Caspian Sea oilfields and seabed (Azerbaijan).⁷

¹ "Turkmenistan," in: *The World Factbook 2007*, Central Intelligence Agency, available at [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html].

² N. Badykova, "The Turkmen Economy: Challenges and Opportunities," Paper presented at Turkmenistan Workshop, Oxford, England, 18 June, 2004.

³ See: V. Ginsburg, M. Troschke, "The Export of Turkmenistan's Energy Resources, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (24), 2003, pp. 108-117.

⁴ See: "Turkmenistan Country Brief 2005," World Bank, available at [http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/TURKMENISTANEXTN/0,contentMDK:20631627~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:300736,00.html], 2006.

⁵ See: N.A. Graham, "Introduction and Overview," in: *The Political Economy of Transition in Eurasia: Democratization and Economic Liberalization in a Global Economy*, ed. by N.A. Graham and F. Lindahl, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI, 2006, pp. 1.

⁶ N. Badykova, *op. cit.*

⁷ See: R. Burnashev, I. Chernykh, "Turkmenistan's Armed Forces: Problems and Development Prospects," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 4 (22), 2003, pp. 32-41.

Turkmenistan's extensive environmental problems include agrichemical contamination of soil and groundwater, salinization, pollution of the Caspian, desertification, biodiversity loss, water-logged soil caused by poor irrigation practices; dam construction, and diversion of the Amur Darya for irrigation, diverting the river from the Aral Sea.⁸ Many of those problems have severe public health and economic consequences as well. And the first major research into the health of the populace found life expectancy to be 62, lower than any other Central Asian or European country, and concluded that its health care system is inadequate even by Central Asian standards.⁹

By all objective measures from academic observers and independent groups, Turkmenistan is a repressive society with no official regard for human and political rights. The country's violations of press, religious, speech, political, and travel rights have been under steady criticism by foreign governments, multinational agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. For example, the U.S. State Department bluntly described it as an authoritarian, one-party state that Niyazov dominated until his death, with a poor record on human rights, attacks on journalists by security forces, constraints on Internet access, phony criminal charges against political dissidents, abuse of adherents of minority religions, and fraudulent elections.¹⁰ The NGO Freedom House rated the country as "not free," with the lowest score on political rights and civil liberties among the five Central Asian republics and cited the secretive nature of the government, widespread corruption in the educational system, and a "continuing Soviet-style command economy," among other systemic problems.¹¹ The Committee to Protect Journalists ranked it among the "worst places to be a journalist" due to governmental control over newspapers and broadcast stations, self-censorship by editors and reporters, and especially harsh treatment of "the U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which has maintained an informal network of correspondents (and) has been the nation's only alternative source of news and information."¹² In September 2006, RFE/RL Turkmen Service correspondent Ogulsapar Muradova died in custody, although authorities attributed her death to natural causes.

The media representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has criticized Turkmen television for using "Stalinist" propaganda methods to "humiliate and destroy individuals" who allegedly attacked Niyazov.¹³ Amnesty International's 2005 report found widespread human rights abuses and harassment of religious minorities and civil society activists, noting, "Small steps to fend off criticism of the country's human rights record failed to adequately address concerns raised by human rights groups and intergovernmental bodies."¹⁴

There is little reason to expect major human rights improvements in the near future, despite Niyazov's death. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, was a Niyazov aide and deputy chairperson of the Council of Ministers and, thus, closely wed to the repressive policies of the past. Five months after his February 2007 election, Eurasianet¹⁵ reported, "If anything, it seems as if the

⁸ See: A. Carius, M. Feil, D. Tanzler, *Addressing Environmental Risks in Central Asia: Risks, Policies, Capacities*, United Nations Development Program, Bratislava, Slovak Republic, 2003.

⁹ See: A. Lichtarowicz, "Concerns over Turkmen Health Care," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 3 June, 2005.

¹⁰ See: "Turkmenistan," in: *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2006*, U.S. Department of State, available at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78845.htm], 6 March, 2007.

¹¹ See: *Freedom in the World 2007*, Freedom House, Washington, DC, available at [<http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7292&year=2007>], 2007.

¹² *Attacks on the Press 2006*, Committee to Protect Journalists, New York, available at [<http://cpj.org/attacks06/europe06/turk06.html>], 2007.

¹³ "OSCE Media Representative Blasts 'Stalinist' Propaganda Methods on Turkmen TV," Press release, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 16 January, 2003.

¹⁴ *Amnesty International Report 2005*, Amnesty International, available at [web.amnesty.org/report2005/tkm-summary-eng], 2005.

¹⁵ See: "Turkmenistan: The Personality Cult Lives on, Residents Take It in Stride," *Eurasianet*, 11 July, 2007.

country's new leader ... is simply replacing Niyazov as the chief object of the cult's affection." It noted that his portrait "has already replaced Niyazov's on state television news broadcasts," and said that displays marking Berdymukhammedov's 50th birthday, including the minting of gold coins with his portrait, "confirmed what many outside observers had suspected: the cult of personality—and centralized, one-man rule—seems destined to remain a dominant feature of public life in Turkmenistan for the foreseeable future." As recently as 17 July, the executive director of the International Helsinki Federation of Human Rights said independent human rights groups still cannot work openly there.¹⁶

The Turkmenbashi

There is no doubt that Niyazov ranked among the world's most overtly idiosyncratic autocrats. A brief BBC biography¹⁷ gave these basics: Born in 1940, Turkmen Communist Party chief in 1985, president since independence in 1991, and president-for-life by act of the Mejlis, the impotent national legislature, since 1999. NGOs have decried the personality cult he developed, including his assumption of the title Turkmenbashi, which means "father of the Turkmen people." D. Burghart wrote that Turkmenistan "evolved into an autocracy that bends to the every whim of the ruler" and that his regime's "sole concern appears to be its own self-perpetuation."¹⁸ As the NGO Human Rights Watch commented, "The perverse cult of personality around President Niyazov dominates public life and the education system."¹⁹

He had a reputation for bluntness. For example, after a 2002 assassination attempt, he characterized his alleged assailants as "a bunch of people who went mad from being too well off. They have reached the highest levels of debauchery, they use drugs, heroin... Who is a traitor? Only somebody who has gone mad."²⁰ His first book, *Rukhnama*,²¹ is compulsory reading in school and university curricula, mosques and preschools.²² It features a color photo of Niyazov and the caption, "the president for a life of independent and neutral Turkmenistan" with his views on topics ranging from Islam to history to war to patriotism to prosperity to individual rights to education to morality to the role of women. The Russian news agency ITAR-TASS described it as "the 'holy book,' which is worshipped in the Central Asian republic not less than the Koran."²³ A sequel was published in 2004.

Niyazov fit the definition of the leader of a "Big Man" regime in which a single person is enshrined as a "Great Leader," as do the leaders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, who, as E. Merry wrote, "intend to remain in personal control indefinitely."²⁴

¹⁶ See: "Rights Group Says Repressive Turkmen Policies Unchanged," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 July, 2007.

¹⁷ See: "Country Profile: Turkmenistan," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, available at [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1298497.stm], 2006.

¹⁸ D.L. Burghart, "In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century," in: *In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century*, ed. by D.L. Burghart, T. Sabonis-Helf (pp. 3-21), National Defense University, Washington, DC, 2004, p. 15.

¹⁹ "Turkmenistan: Human Rights Concerns for the 61st Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, available at [hrw.org/english/docs/2005/03/10/turkme10300.htm], 2005.

²⁰ "OSCE Media Representative Blasts 'Stalinist' Propaganda Methods on Turkmen TV."

²¹ See: S. Turkmenbashi, *Rukhnama: Reflections on the Spiritual Values of the Turkmen*, Ashghabad, 2003.

²² See: S. Ingram, "Turkmen Live by Leader's Book," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 29 May, 2002.

²³ "New *Rukhnama* by Turkmen Leader Saparmurat Niyazov Read to Turkmenistan's Parliament," ITAR-TASS, 24 August, 2004.

²⁴ E.W. Merry, "Politics of Central Asia: National in Form, Soviet in Content," in: *In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century*, p. 32.

The Western press has reported on and, in effect, ridiculed Niyazov and his initiatives in recent years, starting before the period covered by this study and including stories about his death on 21 December, 2006. Among them were Niyazov's order to temporarily remove most of his "all-pervasive" portraits from public buildings in Ashgabad and place an awning over his 5-meter (16-foot) statue in front of the parliament building during the May 2004 visit by Western ambassadors²⁵; his "don't praise me" request to government officials in June 2004; and his personal unveiling of the world's largest handmade carpet called "the 21st Century: The Epoch of the Great Saparmurat Turkmenbashi."²⁶

Theoretical Considerations

News Judgment

Journalists are "gatekeepers" who individually and collectively determine what topics and specific stories are or are not covered, how much space in print or time on the air that stories receive, and how prominently those stories appear within a publication or broadcast. They do so through the exercise of editorial judgment about newsworthiness, which includes such factors as timeliness, proximity, and impact, as well as novelty.²⁷ A host of other factors also influence their judgment including perceived or actual audience interest; the journalists' own interests, educational background, and attitudes about what is important; competition with other media organizations; competition among stories about other issues and events; market or circulation size and location; legal constraints, amount of space or air time available; self-censorship; location and size of staff; and cultural and social values; and access to credible news sources.

Scholars have posited a number of variables or determinants of "newsworthiness" in the context of choosing which international events to report on. They include deviance and relevance; population; cultural affinity including language, ancestry, and religion; level of development and gross domestic product; trade relations; and proximity. G. Golan added the international news agendas of other media sources—in other words, inter-media competition—to that list.²⁸

Framing

Framing is one way that journalists exercise their news judgment, a process that includes deciding which elements of an event to include and what words or images to use. In a classic explanation, R. Entman wrote: "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."²⁹

²⁵ See: "Turkmen Leader's Personality Cult under Wraps for Visiting Western Envoys," *Agence France Press*, 28 May, 2004.

²⁶ R. Mulholland, "The Cult of the Turkmen Leader," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 2 November, 2001.

²⁷ See: M. Mencher, *News Reporting and Writing*, McGraw Hill, Boston, MA, 2005.

²⁸ See: G.J. Golan, "Intermedia Agenda Setting and Global News Coverage," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, ON, 2004.

²⁹ R.M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, No. 43 (4), 1993, p. 52.

As H. Chyi and M. McCombs observed, “A single news event can be framed in various ways, producing different versions containing different attributes.”³⁰ Especially important for this study is the fact that news frames and wording can manipulate how the public interprets issues and develops opinions, and how even subtle framing can lead readers to reach certain conclusions about the information they receive.³¹ As F. Gan *et al.* put it, “The fact that framing might lead audiences to have different reactions is an important implication for political communication.”³² As in this study, framing has been used to compare how media in different countries cover the same issues or events.³³

Without using the term “framing,” D. Kimmage described the stereotype of “dictator as clown,” a concept epitomized by actor Charlie Chaplin’s mocking of Adolph Hitler in the 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. However, such lampooning has moved beyond entertainment into what is offered as news, which mainstream journalists generally assert should be presented with objectivity. He wrote, “Today, the tradition of ‘dictator as clown’ persists in coverage of such countries as Turkmenistan, where it seems the only events deemed newsworthy by mainstream media are the supreme leader’s latest exploits.”³⁴

Declining Western Press Coverage of International News

For decades, researchers have tracked trends in the international content of U.S. newspapers, news magazines, and television broadcasts. Among them were Emery’s 1989 study finding that international news—an “endangered species”—had dropped from 10.2 percent of content in 1971 to 2.6 percent in 1988 in major dailies including the prestigious *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times*; his study period between November 1987 and January 1988 coincided with major news events in Israel’s Occupied Territories, Korea, the Persian Gulf, and Central America.³⁵ C. Stepp compared ten mainstream dailies in 1963-1964 and 1998-1999, finding that foreign news declined from 5 percent to 3 percent overall and from 20 percent to 5 percent on the front pages.³⁶ In broadcasting, G. Utley noted a precipitous decline in foreign coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news shows between 1989 and 1997.³⁷ There is variation among news outlets. For example, C. Beaudoin and E. Thorson found that the *Los Angeles Times* devoted 19 percent of its news hole to international coverage, a higher proportion than most U.S. dailies.³⁸

³⁰ See: H.I. Chyi, M. McCombs, “Media Salience and the Process of Framing: Coverage of the Columbine School Shootings,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, No. 81 (1), 2004, pp. 22-35.

³¹ See: G. Dell’Orto, D. Dong, J. Moore, A. Schneeweis, “The Impact of Framing on Perception of Foreign Countries,” *Ecquid Novi*, No. 25 (2), 2004, pp. 294-312.

³² F. Gan, J.L. Teo, B.H. Detenber, “Framing the Battle for the White House: A Comparison of Two National Newspapers’ Coverage of the 2000 United States Presidential Election,” *International Communication Gazette*, No. 67 (5), 2005, p. 443.

³³ See: C. Maslog, S.T. Lee, H.S. Kim, “Framing Analysis of a Conflict: How Newspapers in Five Asian Countries Covered the Iraq War,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, No. 16 (1), 2006, pp. 19-39.

³⁴ D. Kimmage, “Analysis: Dictator as Clown Grows Stale,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 31 May, 2004.

³⁵ See: M. Emery, “An Endangered Species: The International News Hole,” *Freedom Forum Media Studies Journal*, No. 3, 1989, pp. 151-164.

³⁶ See: C.S. Stepp, “Then and Now,” *American Journalism Review*, No. 21, 1999, p. 60.

³⁷ See: G. Utley, “The Shrinking of Foreign News: From Broadcast to Narrowcast,” *Foreign Affairs*, No. 76 (2), 1997, pp. 2-10.

³⁸ See: C.E. Beaudoin, E. Thorson, “*LA Times* Offered as Model for Foreign News Coverage,” *Newspaper Research Journal*, No. 22 (1), 2002, pp. 80-93.

The importance and potential impact of international news coverage has drawn research attention. Several early studies examined determinants of international news, including distance from the U.S. media capital of New York City, relevance to the United States, and potential for social change.³⁹ Examining *Newsweek's* coverage of Japan, A. Cooper-Chen observed how mass media portrayals can greatly influence U.S. citizens, many of whom lack direct knowledge about Japan.⁴⁰ In another study, D. Perry linked lack of information to “negative attitudes about foreign countries.”⁴¹

The press may be the only source of information that the majority of Westerners have about foreign conflicts, but that is not to assert that the press is the sole agenda-setter, or even the most influential one, according to A. Schiffer's study of *New York Times* coverage of civil wars from 1992 to 1997. “The true, independent power of the news media to set the public agenda depends greatly upon the influences of news content.”⁴² He found the magnitude of a conflict as measured in battle deaths and a president's public remarks downplaying or emphasizing a conflict are stronger indicators of coverage than the power that news organizations wield as independent political actors following “press-specific news-judgment criteria.”

International coverage in the press in other developed countries has undergone scholarly examination as well.⁴³ There are many reasons for declining international coverage by Western media, ranging from financial pressures and mergers to management's perceptions and misperceptions about what readers, listeners, and viewers “want” to hear about. Utley wrote, “The new litmus test at network news programs is whether viewers (in the producers' opinion) will instinctively ‘relate’ to the story.”⁴⁴ Beyond that—and directly relevant to coverage of Turkmenistan and the other Central Asian republics—have been major events outside the control of the media, starting with the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 11 September, 2001, attacks in the United States, the resulting “war on terrorism” and war in Afghanistan, and the outbreak of war in Iraq in 2003. Two years after the Soviet Union broke apart, the president of the Associated Press acknowledged that “viewed from the news desks of the Associated Press, the world's new sources of crisis are far more difficult to cover than the old ones.”⁴⁵

More significant for this study of coverage of Turkmenistan, however, are media and public affairs commentators' lamentations over the same decades about shrinking coverage—to no apparent avail, as demonstrated by the continued minimizing of international coverage. Discussing the trend for U.S. television networks, for example, Utley wrote, “What is being lost, or at least weakened, has long been forecast: the role of a few television network news organizations as a unifying central nervous system of information for the nation, and the communal benefits associated with that.”⁴⁶

³⁹ See: J. Gultrang, M.H. Ruge, “The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba, and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers,” *Journal of Peace Research*, No. 2 (1), 1965, pp. 64-91; J.B. Adams, “Qualitative Analysis of Domestic and Foreign News on the APTA Wire,” *Gazette*, No. 10, 1964, pp. 285-295; T. Chang, P.J. Shoemaker, N. Brendlinger, “Determinants of International News in the U.S. Media,” *Communication Research*, No. 14 (4), 1987, pp. 396-414.

⁴⁰ See: A. Cooper-Chen, “Praising, Bashing, Passing: Newsmagazine Coverage of Japan, 1965-1994,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, LA, New Orleans, 1999.

⁴¹ D.K. Perry, “News Reading, Knowledge about and Attitudes Towards Foreign Countries,” *Journalism Quarterly*, No. 67 (2), 1990, p. 357.

⁴² A.J. Schiffer, “Explaining Foreign Conflicts Coverage,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, IL, Chicago, 2005.

⁴³ See: H. Holm, “The Forgotten Globalization of Journalism Education,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, No. 56 (4), 2002, pp. 67-71; W.C. Soderland, M.F. Lee, P. Gecelovsky, “Trends in Canadian Newspaper Coverage of International News, 1988-2000: Editors' Assessments,” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, No. 27, 2002, pp. 73-87; D. Halton, “International News in the North American Media,” *International Journal*, No. 56, 2002, pp. 499-515.

⁴⁴ G. Utley, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴⁵ L.D. Boccardi, “Redeploying a Global Journalistic Army,” *Media Studies Journal*, No. 7 (4), 1983, p. 44.

⁴⁶ G. Utley, op. cit., p. 10.

Also directly relevant to this study is the failure to reverse a pattern of international coverage by Western—and not solely U.S.—media that has long been criticized as biased, incomplete, largely negative, and concentrating mainly on developed countries.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, there has been little research into how Western news media have covered events in Central Asia since independence, despite the strategic importance of the region to the West. The few studies so far have generally examined the content of certain categories of stories, such as environment, political and press rights, and religion, and the news organizations' use of reporter pseudonyms and undisclosed sources.⁴⁸

Hypotheses and Research Question

- Hypothesis 1: Personal references about the late president of Turkmenistan appear in a majority of Western news stories about the country, even if the principal topic of the story is not the late president, his family, or his arguably grandiose or bizarre ideas, edicts, and projects.
- Hypothesis 2: A news organization will frequently use the same personalizing terminology about the late president of Turkmenistan in multiple stories.
- Research Question: How did Western news media frame the late president of Turkmenistan?

Method

This study examined news stories posted between 1 July, 2004 and 30 June, 2005 from three Western news organizations. This period encompassed four major political developments in the Commonwealth of Independent States: election of a new president in Ukraine in December 2004; the relatively peaceful ouster of Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev in March 2005; the violent suppression of protesters in Andijan, Uzbekistan in May 2005; and Russian President Vladimir Putin's continued consolidation of power and suppression of opponents throughout the period. BBC News online, Eurasianet, and Institute for War & Peace Reporting were selected for content analysis because each published at least six news articles about Turkmenistan during the study period. Although these organizations have different audiences and missions, all three provide a window on Turkmenistan—and, more broadly, Central Asia—to the outside world. The study also drew anecdotally from other Western media organizations that published fewer than six stories each during the same period. They included the *New York Times* and the *Independent*.

⁴⁷ For example, see: G.C. Wilhoit, D.H. Weaver, "Foreign News Coverage in Two U.S. Wire Services: An Update," *Journal of Communication*, No. 33 (2), 1983, pp. 132-148; D.H. Weaver, G.C. Wilhoit, "Foreign News Coverage in Two U.S. Wire Services," *Journal of Communication*, No. 31 (2), 1981, pp. 55-63; W.A.E. Skurnik, "A New Look at Foreign News Coverage," *African Studies Review*, No. 24 (1), 1981, pp. 99-112; J.A. Lent, "Foreign News in American Media," *Journal of Communication*, No. 27, 1977, pp. 46-51.

⁴⁸ For example, see: E. Freedman, M. Walton, "Independent News Web Sites' Coverage of Religious Freedom and Restraint in Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 37 (1), 2006, pp. 102-111; E. Freedman, E. "Coverage of Environmental and Environmental Health News of Central Asia by Independent News Web Sites," in: *History and Society in Central and Inner Asia*, ed. by M. Gervers, U.E. Bulag, G. Long, University of Toronto Asian Institute, Toronto, ON, 2005, pp. 297-316; E. Freedman, "Coverage of Central Asian Political, Press, and Speech Rights Issues by Independent News Websites," *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, No. 16, 2005, pp. 71-86.

The BBC News Web site is the “Internet arm of the biggest broadcasting news-gatherer in the world” and relies on BBC’s own correspondents as well as other news agencies. Eurasianet is operated by the Open Society Institute’s Central Eurasia Project and provides news and analysis about Turkmenistan, the other four Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, Turkey, Mongolia, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Its coverage includes human rights as well as environment, economics and culture.⁴⁹ IWPR is an “international media development charity” registered in the United Kingdom and emphasizes “areas of conflict,” and reports on Central Asia including Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Belarus, Iraq, and the Caucasus with articles about environmental, human rights, and social issues, among other topics.⁵⁰

Each story about Turkmenistan was coded on the basis of whether it dealt primarily with an issue or primarily with Niyazov or one of his personally launched initiatives or projects. Coding also determined whether: Niyazov was mentioned by name, title, or position in the headline; the phrase “personality cult” or “cult of personality” appeared in the article, headline, or photo caption; and the title “Turkmenbashi” with or without its “Father of the Turkmen” translation appeared in the story, headline, or photo caption. Coding also determined whether a story: used words such as “eccentric,” “bizarre,” and “autocratic”; referred to such personal matters as his health, family, ruling style, habits, or portraits; or mentioned such projects and edicts as the ice palace, mosque construction, *Rukhnama*, or ban on long hair.

In addition, the proportion of paragraphs containing such references was calculated as an indicator of how much space in each news organization’s coverage was devoted to personal references.

Findings

Hypothesis 1 posited that a majority of stories would include personal frames, or personal references to Niyazov, whether the story was primarily about him or about an issue or event. Although the vast majority of stories principally concerned issues ranging from health care to the economy to energy (see Table 1), the hypothesis was strongly supported. Every Eurasianet story contained at least one personal reference, as did 83.3 percent of the BBC stories and 80 percent of the IWPR stories.

For example, BBC’s story about Niyazov’s decision to close all hospitals outside Ashgabad and to close rural libraries described the president as “well known for his idiosyncratic orders” and referred to his “spending millions of dollars in public money on grand projects, such as gold statues of the leader and a vast marble and gold mosque, one of the biggest in Asia” in his hometown.⁵¹ These certainly fit into what P. Valkenburg *et al.* described as human interest frames that bring “an individual’s story or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem.”⁵²

While some such references would be expected in stories pertaining to Niyazov, his family, or his personally initiated edicts and projects, questions can be raised about their use in coverage of issues and public policy. Similarly, an IWPR article about AIDS included “Turkmenbashi,” “president for life,” and the fact that Niyazov had declared the 21st century as the “golden age of the Turkmen people.”⁵³

⁴⁹ See: “About Eurasianet,” *Eurasianet*, available at [eurasianet.org], 2007.

⁵⁰ See: “About IWPR: Aims and Activities,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, available at [www.iwpr.net/index.php?p=-apc_state=henh&s=o&o=top_aims.html, 2007.

⁵¹ M. Whitlock, “Turkmen Leader Closes Hospitals,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 1 March, 2005.

⁵² P.M. Valkenburg, H.A. Memetko, C.H. de Vreese, “The Effects of News Framers on Readers’ Thoughts and Recall,” *Journal of Communication*, No. 26 (5), 1999, p. 551.

⁵³ “Turkmenistan in AIDS Denial,” RCA 339, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 7 January, 2005.

The issue goes beyond mere inclusion of personal references about Niyazov into news stories and extends to how much space a news organization devotes to personal frames in its coverage. Table 1 shows the percentage of paragraphs containing a personal frame or reference in each organization's stories. That proportion ranged from about one-fifth of stories to twice that figure.

Table 1

**Personal Frame Paragraphs
in Stories by Three Western News Organizations,
1 July, 2004-30 June, 2005**

News organization	Eurasianet	BBC	IWPR
Stories	7	18	30
Number/percent issue stories	6/85.8%	10/55.6%	18/93.3%
Total paragraphs	98	268	679
Personal paragraphs	42	110	130
Percent of personal paragraphs	42.9%	41%	19.1%

The second hypothesis—that three news organizations frequently use the same belittling terminology about Niyazov—also was supported, although each news organization had its own preferred terminology. For example, one-third of BBC stories referred to a personality cult; 45 percent incorporated his “president-for-life” title; 39 percent used his self-proclaimed title “Turkmenbashi”; and 22 percent mentioned his book *Rukhnama*, which means “book of the soul.” Eurasianet referred to a personality cult in all but one story, used the adjective “mercurial” in 71 percent of its stories, and used “Turkmenbashi” in 57 percent. Finally, the self-proclaimed title “Turkmenbashi” appeared in 70 percent of IWPR stories.

The research question asked how Western news media frame Niyazov. The analysis shows two principal personal frames, one concerning personality and the other concerning ruling style. All three news organizations chose words and phrases that could be characterized as “belittling” in framing his personality and “demonizing” in framing his ruling style (see Table 2). For example, stories used such personality-related adjectives as “eccentric,” “idiosyncratic,” and “outlandish,” and such ruling style-related words as “autocratic,” “ruthless” and “close eye on his people.”

As Table 3 shows, half those stories containing personal references included both belittling and demonizing references. Where a story had only category of personal frame, it was fifteen times as likely to include demonizing rather than belittling references.

IWPR stories also referred to his foreign bank accounts and diamond rings, his multiple palaces, and an incident when he was reportedly seen “showering dollars” on musicians and dancers who performed for him. In addition, the news organizations repeatedly invoked personal iconic projects and edicts, even in articles not directly related to them. His book, *Rukhnama*, was mentioned in eleven of the fifty-five stories. Almost half the BBC stories mentioned his ubiquitous portraits in public places and his ban on smoking. And each news organization mentioned at least once his renaming of the calendar, an event that occurred before the study period.

Table 2

Representative “Belittling” and
 “Demonizing” Words about Niyazov
 in Stories by Three Western News Organizations,
 1 July, 2004-30 June, 2005

<i>Belittling</i>
Idiosyncratic, mercurial, paranoia, eccentric, grandiose, fickle, outlandish, extravagant, glorify, arbitrary, styles himself, self-proclaimed, cult of personality, Golden Age of the People, standing ovation
<i>Demonizing</i>
Autocratic, president-for-life, Turkmenbashi, Father of the Turkmen, authoritarian, personal authority, political loyalty, close eye on his people, unchallenged authority, hold over society, dictatorship, tyrant, despotic, repressive, regime, totalitarian, fall (a)foul, Leader, ruthless, tough if sometimes unreliable, all powerful, one-party, iron fist, strongman, tight hold, exclusive hold on power, grip on power, disastrous legacy, impose his vision

Table 3

News Stories Containing “Belittling” and
 “Demonizing” Personal Frames
 in Three Western News Organizations,
 1 July, 2004-30 June, 2005

Stories with personal frames	Stories with only belittling references	Stories with only demonizing references	Stories with both
Eurasianet 7	0	0	7
BBC 15	0	3	12
IWPR 24	1	12	11
Total 46	1	15	30

**Discussion, Implications,
 and Future Research**

It is essential to recognize that Niyazov was the figure most responsible for developing Turkmenistan’s national policies and programs and, thus, his persona could be a legitimate component of news coverage to put policies, programs, and events into context for readers. His regime’s construction of projects of questionable public benefit diverted vast resources away from social programs such

as health care, economic development, and pensions. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's remote location, isolationist foreign policy, dearth of foreign correspondents, lack of independent domestic media, reluctance of potential news sources to be interviewed, penchant for official secrecy, and lack of governmental transparency combine to make it difficult for foreign journalists to report credibly and in depth on serious issues and controversies. Thus it was easier for journalists to focus on—or at least touch on—Niyazov himself.

With that understanding in mind, the findings reinforce Entman's observation that "the portrait of framing has important implications for political communication."⁵⁴ Here, the portrayal of Niyazov has implications for informed Western knowledge and understanding of political, economic, diplomatic, and human rights events and policies in Turkmenistan and, by extension, its Central Asian neighbors. The over-personalization of Western news coverage of Turkmenistan diverts serious attention from those events and policies. To draw a comparison, it would be as if the majority of foreign press stories about the United States during Bill Clinton's presidency incorporated a "president-as-slimeball" frame. Under that analogy, most stories in the non-U.S. press would have at least mentioned, if not dwelt on, Clinton's sexual infidelities, perjury, draft avoidance during the Vietnam War, marijuana use, "Slick Willy" nickname, and other personal matters irrelevant to substantive issues that were nominally the topic of those stories. In the case of Niyazov, the argument can be made that demonizing references are relevant from a newsworthiness perspective in some issue-related stories, including those about political activity and political and human rights. Certainly the phrase "exclusive hold on power" is relevant in BBC coverage of a parliamentary election in which every candidate belonged to the president's party and had pledged loyalty to Niyazov.⁵⁵ However, one can question the relevance of references to "cult of personality" and *Rukhnama* in an article about child laborers harvesting cotton.⁵⁶

When it comes to Western media coverage, Turkmenistan is "on the border of visibility," to use a phrase that D. Gladney applied to news about the Uighurs and Muslim unrest in China's Xinjiang region. He attributed skimpy American press attention to news from Xinjiang to "a combination of a lack of reporting on the ground and a lack of interest in the home offices of American news organizations," and said that stories by those reporters who do visit the region "get killed until a bomb goes off and alerts people that there is a problem."⁵⁷ That situation is similar to but not a perfect analogue of Western news coverage of Turkmenistan. While Niyazov's aberrational behavior may substitute for the bombings in Xinjiang as a device to get a story aired or printed, it remains difficult for Western journalists to obtain visas to report in the country.

Similarly, if even Japan, "as a non-Western country ... presents special challenges in reporting to a U.S. audience" as Cooper-Chen suggested,⁵⁸ how much greater is the challenge to reporters whose stories deal with a place as unfamiliar and remote to most Americans as Turkmenistan?

Even news organizations committed to international coverage usually ignored Turkmenistan or included only incidental or passing references in the context of broader stories, such as ones about energy or events in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. For example, the *International Herald Tribune* published passing references to Turkmenistan but no staff-written stories primarily about the country during the period of the study. When they did cover the country, they tended to include personal frames in their

⁵⁴ R.M. Entman, op. cit., p. 55.

⁵⁵ See: M. Whitlock, "Turkmenistan Poll Turnout 'Low,'" *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 20 December, 2004.

⁵⁶ See: "Turkmenistan Wrestles with Child Labor Issue as Cotton Harvest Approaches," *Eurasianet*, 1 September, 2004.

⁵⁷ D.C. Gladney, "On the Border of Visibility: Western Media and the Uyghur Minority," *Media Studies Journal*, No. 13 (1), 1999, p. 132.

⁵⁸ A. Cooper-Chen, op. cit.

stories. A rare Canadian Broadcasting Corporation story dealt with Niyazov's order banning national TV anchors from wearing too much makeup; the story also mentioned his decrees cracking down on long hair and beards, female students with unbraided hair and young people with gold-capped teeth.⁵⁹ A headline in the British newspaper the *Independent* spoke of "the bizarre world of Turkmenbashi the Great."⁶⁰ In a 2004 article about the second *Rukhnama* volume, the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS—which pays more attention to Turkmenistan than does the Western press—recapped how Niyazov had renamed the calendar months.⁶¹

Even the *New York Times*, which has long ranked among the world's elite daily newspapers⁶² and is often praised for its foreign affairs coverage, devoted little space to Turkmenistan during the period, publishing only three news articles—all briefs of eighty to 113 words each—about the country. Two dealt with Niyazov himself, with headlines that included such words as "autocrat plans elections" and "the president's mosque"; the third reported on the shipment of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Ukraine.⁶³ Also, a Week in Review analysis of the effects on the United States of changes in the Middle East included Turkmenistan only in a sidebar graphic showing a poster of Niyazov with the observation that his likeness "is displayed throughout the nation" and commenting that he "has created a Soviet-style personality cult."⁶⁴

A 2004 IWPR story about the weak Turkmen currency said Niyazov "can be seen showering (U.S.) dollars on the musicians and dancers who perform for him." That image is echoed in another *New York Times* Week in Review article, about reality television, incorporated Kimmage's 2004 "dictator as clown" concept in a discussion of Donald Trump's U.S. television reality series, "The Apprentice." The *Times* described a scene in which Trump was "hailed by a crowd of admirers outside Trump Towers as if he were the ruler of Turkmenistan, tossing coins at the supplicant peasants in front of his palace."⁶⁵

Framing poses risks for journalists and audiences alike, including the use of simplistic formulas to explain complex countries.

Kimmage's image of the "dictator as clown" also raises the question of whether leaders such as Niyazov notice the ridicule they engender in foreign media and react to it in a way that creates any positive change. "If Niyazov is not turning a blind eye and deaf ear to the world, it might be time for the media to retire the creaky knee-slappers about the 'world's weirdest dictator' and begin writing in greater depth about a place that is, to be honest, no longer terribly funny," he suggested.⁶⁶ But potential changes within Turkmenistan are not the principal concern to journalists elsewhere, or to their readers and audiences. Rather, the issue is how people outside Turkmenistan understand what is happening inside the country and what that news could mean to their own lives. What J. Mann wrote of China applies equally to Turkmenistan: "The urge to generalize is understandable, but China"—substitute Turkmenistan here—"is too big, too complex, too diverse to capture in a single frame."⁶⁷

⁵⁹ See: "Turkmenistan Leader Bans Makeup on TV," *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, 13 August, 2004.

⁶⁰ S. Castle, "The Bizarre World of Turkmenbashi the Great," *The Independent*, 23 April, 2005.

⁶¹ See: *New Rukhnama* by Turkmen Leader Saparmurat Niyazov Read to Turkmenistan's Parliament.

⁶² See: J.C. Merrill, H.A. Fisher, "The World's Great Dailies," Hastings, New York, 1980, pp. 25-42.

⁶³ See: S.L. Myers, "Turkmenistan: Autocrat Plans Elections," *New York Times*, April 2005, pp. A2, A9; idem, "Turkmenistan: Gas to Ukraine Halted," *New York Times*, 1 January, 2005, p. A9; "Turkmenistan: The President's Mosque," *New York Times*, 23 October, 2004, p. A6.

⁶⁴ R. Cohen, "What's in it for America?" *New York Times*, 6 March, 2005, pp. WK3.

⁶⁵ A. Stanley, "TV's Busby Berkley Moment," *New York Times*, 30 January, 2005, p. WK1.

⁶⁶ D. Kimmage, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ J. Mann, "Framing China: A Complex Country Cannot Be Explained with Simplistic Formulas," *Media Studies Journal*, No. 13 (1), 1999, p. 106.

In the future, researchers should look more broadly at foreign press framing of Central Asia, both to discuss the implications for understanding of the region and to compare contemporary media framing with previous studies of representations and stereotyping of “exotic” parts of the world. Such studies could examine the coverage of discrete events—such as the Tulip Revolution that ousted Kyrgyzstan’s president, Askar Akaev, in March 2005, or Uzbekistan’s violent suppression of protests in Andijan in May 2005—and issues of public controversy, such as Western and Russian military bases in the region or energy. It would also be fruitful to contrast coverage by Western and Russian media, especially in light of Russia’s renewed interest in political and economic ties with the republics.