MASS MEDIA

# PRESS SYSTEMS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: IMPEDIMENTS IN THE TRANSITION TO "DEMOCRATIC JOURNALISM" IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN AND GEORGIA

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## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the contemporary press environment and existing research on the press—including the role of new media in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. In the early 1990s, these successor states emerged from the dismantled Soviet empire to form new governments, press systems, and other national institutions. Each*

*was nominally committed to developing free enterprise-based economies and democratic governance. The article discusses the press after they became part of the U.S.S.R., critiques the three national press environments, and examines how rapid expansion of social media use is blurring traditional definitions of journalism. Last, it concludes that significant obstacles remain to development of functional, effective press systems that can maintain economic and political autonomy and plurality in the South Caucasus.*

**KEYWORDS:** ***Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, press environment, new media, post-Soviet, press freedom.***

## *Introduction*

As in all former colonized nations, the transition of the historically subjugated South Caucasus states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—to independence and democratic governance inherently requires freedom of expression, whether individual, collective, or mediated by news organizations. In democratic theory, a leading normative belief is that guaranteeing press rights helps ensure that free media will play a watchdog role over government and over nongovernmental influence-wielders and over actual and perceived power sources in a society. Whitten-Woodring wrote that press freedom "has long been considered crucial to democracy because the news media provide a fundamental informational linkage between mass publics, elites, and governments."[1] Relly put it this way: "Democratic theory suggests that a free news media and access to public information are associated with an informed electorate in what ultimately constitutes a feedback loop to government… This model is based on the assumption that citizens will access government-held information on their own or through news media monitoring and ultimately hold government accountable through free and fair elections."[2]

Certainly, nowhere in the world is freedom of expression absolute. Government controls, cultural and social constraints, economic and political impediments, self-censorship, and journalists' professional and ethical standards inevitably lead to explicit and implicit obstructions of press freedom. Barriers include mandatory or self-imposed restrictions on content; regulation and licensing of media outlets, individual journalists, or both; and balancing fundamental but conflicting social, cultural, and religious values.

This study addresses press freedom in the South Caucasus—constraints, infringement, and concerns about present and future journalism—during the turbulent, almost quarter-century since these countries regained independence. Journalists there continue to report serious problems practicing their profession. The region's media situation carries implications for other post-Soviet and post-authoritarian countries on their own difficult path toward democratic and transparent governance, toward informed and participatory citizenries, and toward supporting a corps of journalists able to carry out their responsibilities to their audiences and the public at large.

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[1] J. Whitten-Woodring, "Watchdog or Lapdog? Media Freedom, Regime Type, and Government Respect for Human Rights," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 53, 2009, pp. 595-625.

[2] J.E. Relly, "Do Journalists Have Information Access? Exploring News Media Freedom and Colonial Heritage in 42 Nations," Paper presented at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Denver, CO, 4-7 August, 2010.

# The Pre-Independence Press in the South Caucasus

Little academic research in the early post-Soviet years focused on the mass media in the South Caucasus. Rather, discussion of the region was usually wrapped into broader studies of former Soviet republics, former Warsaw Pact countries, or both. However, journalists in the South Caucasus have struggled to achieve and maintain press freedom throughout their histories as part of broader struggles against invaders and occupiers. For example, the South Caucasus suffered harsh press censorship and suppression of national languages under czarist Russification policies established in the 19th century. Thus it is impossible to separate these current press systems from the long experience of serving as appendages of first Russian Czarist and then the Russian-dominated Soviet systems.

This section uses the historical narrative method to explain the evolution of the region's press since independence. Historical narrative is appropriate here because it goes beyond the mere recitation of facts. Rather, it supplies a strong sense of existing tensions and resolution of those tensions to capture important elements of time and place.[3]

Each country entered the Soviet era with its own press history and with its own experience of the press as a tool for political communication. For example, one scholar wrote that Armenians were "among the first to use the press to fight for nationalism," their journalism "has been mainly revolutionary" since the late 18th century, and in 1902 they became "the first Near Easterners to enter communism by developing Bolshevik journalism in the Caucasus" through the activities of revolutionaries.[4] Those revolutionaries included Stepan Shahumian, founder of the first Bolshevik organizations in Armenia and Vladimir Lenin's advisor on the Caucasus. Between 1902 and 1920, the Armenian Bolsheviks established twenty-three newspapers, including some in the territory of contemporary Georgia and Azerbaijan.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, journalists in the new Soviet Union became "agents of social intervention" because their work intentionally and mandatorily helped sustain the world's largest multiethnic federation for more than seven decades.[5] That role became the assigned task of journalists in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia after Bolshevik Russia annexed those countries and incorporated them in 1922 into the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. In 1936, Joseph Stalin separated them into the Armenian, Azerbaijan, and Georgian socialist republics.

Kulikova and Ibraeva described the pre-1991 press situation across the U.S.S.R. this way: "Available was a broad hierarchical network of print media, from the central level to the lowest one, which unified journalists of the Soviet breed, who were capable of serving the party and were not accustomed to professional freedom. There existed a multi-decade tradition in the relations between the media and government, where the government communicated with the media in a monologue-style."[6] Party leaders recognized reporters and editors as intellectual workers critical to social and economic change. Many belonged to party elites who received such rewards as cars, superior housing, dachas, paid vacations to the Black Sea or other recreation areas in the U.S.S.R., and—to a limited

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[3] See: R. Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*, Second edition, Harper, New York, 1995.

[4] See: K. Mooradian, "The Press and the Sword: Armenian Journalism since 1512," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 47, December 1970, pp. 746-757.

[5] See: R. Shafer, E. Freedman, "Journalists as Agents of Social Intervention: Three Models," *Journal of Development Communication*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 16-28.

[6] S. Kulikova, G. Ibraeva, *The Historical Development and Current Situation of the Mass Media in Kyrgyzstan*, Occasional Papers 1, Geneva, Switzerland, Cimera Foundation, 2001, p. 20.

extent—travel abroad. Political dissent was rare because of the party's overwhelming control and the addiction to such perks, political power and social status.[7]

Hopkins presented a list of Soviet values and virtues used as guidelines for journalists:

(1) party orientation (*partiinost*), meaning conscious acceptance of the press as a politically partisan institution required to express party philosophy and goals;

(2) high level of ideology (*vysokaya ideinost*), referring to spiritual reinforcement of the media with Marxist-Leninist theology;

(3) truthfulness (*pravdivost*), or truthful transmission of information;

(4) popular orientation (*narodnost*), reminding the mass media of their responsibilities to the masses, and of the people's access to state-owned press;

(5) mass character (*massovost*), meaning the press serves the masses while functioning among them; and

(6) criticism and self-criticism (*kritika and samokritika*), requiring the press to critique weaknesses and failures of party and government, as well as its own performance.[8]

In their agency role, journalists advanced socialist experimentation. At home, they generated popular support for "five-year" and other centralized economic plans. In foreign affairs, they rallied the citizenry against Nazi Germany's aggression and toward eventual victory in World War II. Later, they supported the USSR's Cold War engagement with the West.[9] Soviet-era South Caucasus journalists and their counterparts across the empire were entrusted with affirmative missions to encourage unification of disparate cultures and reduce religious conflicts, especially potential religion-based terrorism. To do so, they needed cross-cultural knowledge and sensitivities to promote homogenization of citizens whose demographics included deeply diverse language, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. One result: the U.S.S.R. generally succeeded in instilling a sense of patriotism and national identity among its citizenry.

Pervasiveness was another core attribute of the press. Publications and broadcast channels reached virtually all households—no matter how remote—with the same message. Wyka described it as "saturation" and "absolute penetration of the potential public."[10]

This was a press system. Altschull wrote, that "…dismissed Western notions of fainess and balance as mere pretenses and held that objectivity was possible only under the banner of Marxism-Leninism."[11] The Soviet approach conflicted with the international professional ethic that journalists be independent observers, recorders, and analysts, avoiding ideological and political biases, while practicing fair, balanced, ethical, accurate, and fact-based reporting.

Because the South Caucasus socialist republics belonged to the Moscow-imposed national press system, the most important newspapers were party and Komsomol organs appearing in national languages and Russian. For example, the three largest Armenian dailies in 1970 came from the Armenian Communist Party Central Committee and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic Supreme Soviet; Armenian Communist Party Erevan city committee and city Soviet of Workers' Deputies; and Armenia's Young Communist League Central Committee.[12]

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[7] See: E. Androunas, *Informatsionnaya elita: korporatsii i rynok novostey*, Moscow State University, Moscow, 1991.

[8] See: M.W. Hopkins, *Mass Media in the Soviet Union,* Pegasus, New York, 1970, p. 34.

[9] See: S. Antonova, R. Shafer, E. Freedman, "Journalism Education in Russia: Contemporary Trends in a Historical Context," *Journal of Global Mass Communication*, Vol. 4, Issues 1-4, 2011, pp. 133-151.

[10] A.W. Wyka, "Berlusconization of the Mass Media in East Central Europe: The New Danger of Italianization?" *Internet Platform for CEE Research*, Vienna, 2007, p. 1.

[11] H.J. Altschull, *Agents of Power: the Media and Public Policy*, Longman, White Plains, NY, 1995, p. 377.

[12] See: K. Mooradian, op. cit.

The clash between ideologies and pragmatism spilled over after independence when many news outlets became mouthpieces for political parties and ambitious individual politicians. These nascent governments inherited a shared mass media legacy in which journalists and their news organizations remained products of Soviet training and agents for social change and monopolistic political theology. Thus it would require a major metamorphosis for media outlets and their staffs and owners—both state and private—to evolve from propagandists to independent practitioners of fair, balanced, accurate, and objective reporting and presentation of news and information. Not surprisingly, the road to this transition proved difficult. Journalists would need to dodge potholes and maneuver around detours if they were to validate the watchdog role of the press in fostering political diversity and government transparency and if they were to achieve high press freedom ratings from outside media watchdog groups.

Our research indicates that metamorphosis has yet to occur. Post-independence constitutions and statutes enshrined press freedom but have not brought it about. Even so, such enactments highlighted an end to the monopoly of communist ideology and control over the mass media as "the party cause." New statutes established that legal mechanisms, not party decrees and resolutions, would regulate the press—in theory but not in practice, as the record since 1991 shows.

# Press Freedom in the South Caucasus in the Post-Soviet Era

This article now examines how journalists in the South Caucasus emerged from such a constrained communist press system and dealt with obstacles to both nation-building and constructing effective press models suited to the region in light of cultural and religious conditions. Using 2012-2013 data and reports, it draws from domestic and international press rights and human rights organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Freedom House, International Press Institute, and Reporters sans Frontières (RSF); from multinational agencies such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and from foreign governments such as the U.S. State Department. It is also informed by 2012-2013 news reports[13] in domestic and international media such as the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, EurasiaNet, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and Transitions Online about press restrictions, relevant legislation, and press rights activism.

Independence brought massive changes. As the Soviet Union collapsed, "the wide masses found themselves in an ocean without aim or direction," Muminova wrote. "As a result, everything that [Soviet] people had done before 1991 became senseless. The media of all Union republics (later the newly independent states) reflected the situation in a very similar way: confusion, degradation or even paralysis of power, and worsened material and financial conditions."[14] New regimes to varying degrees used the press as a tool to develop what Muminova labeled a "national mentality": national identity and a sense of statehood—and in some countries creation of new national mythologies, cults of personality, or both. South Caucasus journalists were ill-prepared to play a major role in building democracy, according to Kvesitadze, who said the Georgian press lacked professionalism, erudition

[13] Individual news stories are not cited unless quoted from.

[14] F. Muminova, "National Identity, National Mentality, and the Media," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 5 (17), 2002, pp. 131-132.

and knowledge of democratic values necessary to fulfill this mission.[15] Most importantly, the sense of statehood and the national interest were as alien to Georgia's press as to the whole of Georgian society. The press was expected to play a crucial role in bringing these ideas to the public, which was in a vacuum after the Soviet Union dissolved. A study of Armenian national commercial radio news programming found that Western experts often introduced its journalists to Western "notions of objectivity, newsworthiness, and competition" but noted, "While [W]estern and local trainers tended to reinforce the idea of media's 'watchdog' function in society, they did not warn the recipients about the dangers of blind acceptance of the 'objectivity' myth."[16]

Nor were the newborn countries monolithic, despite their shared press history. Richter noted, "Since the early 1990s, the post-Soviet states have increasingly diverged in the way they define the essence and boundaries of freedom of mass information. In some—Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Ukraine—the definition and its practical implementation have in large measure moved toward the [W]estern model… But in others, they are predominantly 'negative.'"[17]

Divergence from the Western model of "democratic journalism"—more precisely, Western models, plural—was visible early on. For example in 1995, two Azerbaijani journalists were sentenced to prison for publishing a satirical journal after what the president of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe characterized as a "'normal Soviet-style trial' where the judge 'was more aggressive than the prosecutors,' where the defendants had been jailed in isolation for the previous six months, and where eight to twelve armed soldiers were in the courtroom."[18]

And in 1996, the Georgian Ministry of Communication revoked the license of the independent television station that was the first to broadcast nongovernmental news; it had been licensed for only two weeks, "but the government feared the competition would reduce revenues for the state television operation."[19]

All three constitutions contain press freedom provisions. Azerbaijan's Article 50.2 states, "Freedom of mass media is guaranteed. State censorship in mass media, including press, is prohibited." Georgia's Article 24.2 provides, "Mass media is free. Censorship is prohibited," while its Article 24.4 provides a qualifier by allowing press freedom to "be restricted by law and by the conditions necessary in a democratic society for the guarantee of state and public security, territorial integrity, prevention of crime, and the defense of rights and dignities of others to avoid the revelation of confidentially received information or guarantee the independence and impartiality of justice." Article 27 of Armenia's Constitution of 2005 says in part, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of speech, including freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of state frontiers. Freedom of media and other means of information shall be guaranteed." However, Article 19 says, "Attendance of representatives of media and public may be excluded from all or part of the trial with a view to protecting the public morals, public order, state security, private life of participants of the judicial proceedings or the interests of justice."

Press constraints draw criticism about all three countries. Some are reflected quantitatively by international nongovernmental organizations such as RSF, Freedom House, and International Re-

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[15] See: E. Kvesitadze, "The Georgian Press Today," *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, Vol. 3 (15), 2002.

[16] G. Torosyan, K. Starck, "Renegotiating Media in the Post-Soviet Era: Western Journalistic Practices in the Armenian Radio Programme *Aniv*," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2006, pp. 209, 211.

[17] A. Richter, "Post-Soviet Perspective on Evaluating Censorship and Freedom of the Media," in: *Measures of Press Freedom and Media Contributions to Development: Evaluating the Evaluators*," ed. by M.E. Price, S. Abbott, L. Morgan, Peter Lang, New York, 2011, p. 166.

[18] D. Mills, "Post-1989 Journalism in the Absence of Democratic Traditions," in: *Eastern European Journalism: Before, During and after Communism*," ed. by J. Aumente, P. Gross, R. Hiebert, O.V. Johnson, D. Mills, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ, 1999, p. 132.

[19] Ibid., p. 131.

search & Exchanges Board (IREX) (see Table 1). The latest Freedom House report cited "positive developments" in Georgia and Armenia, although not enough to change their overall ratings.[20]

*Table 1*

**Press Freedom Ratings by International Nongovernmental Organizations, 2013**

| Country | Reporters sans Frontières (of 179 countries) | Freedom House | International Research & Exchanges Board |
|---|---|---|---|
| Armenia | 74 | Not free | Borderline unsustainable mixed system/near sustainability |
| Azerbaijan | 156 | Not free | Unsustainable mixed system |
| Georgia | 100 | Partly free | Near sustainability |

*Sources*: Reporters sans Frontières (2013); International Research & Exchanges Board (2013); Freedom House (2013).

Qualitative critiques come from human rights and press rights NGOs and multinational or non-Caucasus governmental agencies, including the CPJ, Human Rights Watch, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, and International Freedom of Express Exchange.

# An Overview of Press Freedom Conditions in Armenia

The U.S. State Department found that violent attacks on journalists continued in 2012, including an attack on a journalist who was filming outside a polling place, "but there were fewer libel suits and smaller damage awards based on a 2011 Constitutional Court recommendation against disproportionately high fines. It reported that print media "published differing viewpoints" but "continued to lack diversity of political opinion and objective reporting." It said, "Most publications tended to reflect the political leanings of their proprietors and financial backers," and few newspapers "operated as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises." Broadcasters in particular "feared reprisals for reporting critical of the government," including lawsuits, threats to their licenses, tax inquiries, and loss of advertisers. "Fear of retribution led to a high degree of media self-censorship."[21]

There appears to have been little significant change in the media environment since the ruling coalition kept its parliamentary majority in the May 2012 elections. Two journalists were reportedly assaulted while reporting on the election, according to an international NGO that also observed, "Politically motivated defamation lawsuits no longer appear to be a problem, but media pluralism is

[20] See: Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2013*, p. 8.

[21] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Armenia," U.S. State Department, 2013, available at [http://www.state.gov].

lacking."[22] That said, Freedom House said Armenia's score improved "because media coverage of the parliamentary elections was generally more balanced than in previous election periods, opposition parties made greater use of online media, harassment and violence against journalists declined compared with the last election year, and there was a dramatic reduction in defamation or slander complaints against journalists."[23]

Meanwhile, a recent survey[24] found that virtually identical proportions of Armenians partially or fully trust (47 percent) the press or partially or fully (48 percent) distrust it. National television was "simultaneously the most trusted [55 percent] and distrusted [42 percent] source of information;" 55 percent of respondents reported that national TV is not independent of the government. More than three-quarters of respondents believed that media owners influence content, and political affiliation is viewed as a prime factor in this. Nevertheless, Armenians have a strong desire for a free media, and 80 percent say that television should be able to broadcast what it wants.

# An Overview of Press Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan

According to Human Rights Watch, "The atmosphere for political activists and independent and pro-opposition journalists [has grown] acutely hostile."[25] The U.S. State Department said newspapers, including opposition and independent outlets, expressed a wide range of opinions on government policies, it said, but "most media practiced self-censorship and avoided topics considered politically sensitive." Its report said, "The broadcast media adhered to a pro-government line in their news coverage" and "foreign broadcasters, including the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and the British Broadcasting Corporation remained prohibited from broadcasting on FM frequencies."[26] As an international media development NGO noted, "An impressive number of over 5,000 TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers does not translate into a pluralism of views… Only one television station provides anything approaching balanced reporting."[27]

Journalists continue to be assaulted and kidnapped in Azerbaijan. For example, when a journalist was beaten in 2012 while filing a confrontation involving employees of the state oil company, the company criticized the assault but accused the journalist of provoking the violence. Some have been arrested and imprisoned. In March 2013, the chief editor of an independent newspaper received a nine-year sentence for extortion and taking a bribe from a former member of parliament. The following month, a court imposed an eight-year sentence on the editor of a religious news website for what press rights defenders say was his coverage of events involving Muslims. In 2012, authorities charged a pro-democracy blogger and photographer with "hooliganism" and assault for purportedly insulting

[22] "World Report 2013: Armenia," Human Rights Watch, 2013, available at [http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/armenia?page=1].

[23] *Freedom of the Press 2013*, p. 8.

[24] See: K. Pearce, *Armenian Media Landscape: Formative Research for the Alternative Resources in Media Program*, Survey Report, 2011.

[25] "World Report 2013: Azerbaijan," Human Rights Watch, 2013, available at [http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/azerbaijan].

[26] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Azerbaijan," U.S. State Department, 2013, available at [http://www.state.gov].

[27] *Media Sustainability Index 2013: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, International Research & Exchanges Board, Washington, D.C., 2013, p. 147.

and injuring police at an unauthorized political rally. Also in 2012, the editor-in-chief of a weekly minority-language newspaper was falsely charged with spying for Iran and possession of heroin. Although the regime in 2012 released fifteen people regarded as imprisoned for exercising freedom of the press or of speech, at least six remained behind bars at the end of the year.

The governmental structures themselves use the media to undermine their critics. For example in April 2012, an independent investigative reporter who hosts a RFE/RL program went public to attack what she claimed was a blackmail attempt; Khadija Ismayilova, who has reported about high-level corruption, criticized prosecutors for failing to properly investigate whoever sent intimate photographs to local newspapers and posted a sexually explicit video online. Two years earlier, an illegally obtained video of two other journalists at a hotel appeared on nationwide television in an effort to disgrace them.

As for news organizations, the State Department, described how an independent newspaper "faced closure due to financials trains reportedly caused by fines imposed in defamation cases, by the unwillingness of companies to advertise in the newspaper, and by the takeover of its distributor's kiosks."[28]

# An Overview of Press Freedom Conditions in Georgia

In October 2012, Georgia experienced its first peaceful election-based parliamentary change since independence when an opposition collation defeated the ruling party. The ability of the press to disseminate political information in the run-up was strengthened by legislation that required satellite content providers and networks to carry all TV stations that broadcast news for the sixty days leading to the election. That allowed the three pro-opposition private channels to deepen their penetration in urban areas served by cable networks.[29] Nine years earlier, the press also played a role in a different type of regime change—the country's 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted a corrupt and authoritarian presidential administration.[30] Even so, the regime of President Mikheil Saakashvilli, who took power in 2003, took strong anti-press freedom steps of its own, such as closing a private television station in 2007 and blocking Russian websites and television stations when Russian troops invaded the country in 2008.[31]

There are recent reports of press constraints and intimidation. For instance, in July 2012, ten news agency and television reporters were injured while covering a public meeting in Karaleti, one of several incidents of verbal and physical harassment in the Shida Qartli region. Separately, a photographer who had been accused of espionage and was freed under a plea bargain, said authorities had pressured him to make a false confession. The U.S. State Department reported that "direct or indirect government influence over the most watched countrywide media outlets remained a problem" despite the active presence of independent media. It also cited reports of verbal and physical attacks on jour-

[28] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Azerbaijan."

[29] See: "World Report 2013: Georgia," Human Rights Watch, 2013, available at [http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/georgia].

[30] See: D. Anable, "The Role of Georgia's Media—and Western Aid—in the Rose Revolution," *Press/Politics*, Vol. 11, Issue 3, 2006, pp. 7-43.

[31] See: J. Barrett, *Media Relations in Georgia with the Government*, Research Report, International Research & Exchanges Board, 2008.

nalists, such as detention and beating of a journalist taking pictures of a police station, confiscation of cameras and "intimidation of journalists by government officials due to their reporting."[32]

In addition, survey research shows that Georgians cite three principal reasons why the press "is not free to express various political views: government pressure, corrupt media; and media not reporting "bad news."[33]

As of spring 2013, legislators were reviewing proposed amendments to the broadcasting law to "ensure greater pluralism and transparency in the work of the public broadcaster" and require the public broadcaster "to carry the signal of other broadcasters as part of its network."[34] In addition, Freedom House identified Georgia's press environment as noticeably improved in 2012 because of "increased political diversity in the television market, including through the return of Imedi TV to its previous private owners."[35]

On the financial front, the State Department said only a few newspapers were viable commercially and noted that the outgoing government gave pro-regime television stations disproportionate tax reductions, while "opposition-leaning stations reportedly paid most or all of their taxes due to fear that they would be fined or closed if they did not."[36]

Even so, Georgian journalists and media experts have been optimistic about the future. They credit television coverage of a prison abuse scandal for "seal[ing] the fate" of President Saakashvili's political party in the 2012 parliamentary elections when an opposition coalition won a majority of seats. "Political competition opened the field for greater pluralism," a media development NGO said, "but also revealed the difficulties of establishing apolitical media firms and outlets in Georgia."[37]

The issue of Georgian market support for independent media can be viewed as a proxy for the same question in the other two countries. Wilcox identified key impediments to a sustainable advertising-supported press system in Georgia: lack of qualified advertising professionals; lack of independent auditing of listenership and circulation; a "skewed advertising market where an estimated 80 percent of the total advertising spent in the nation go to the two major TV stations, which are generally perceived as 'pro-government' in news coverage and ownership;" perception of the press as "more polemic than fact-based," and declining newspaper circulation.[38]

Of course, the type of censorship and physical and legal harassment of journalists remains fundamentally unchanged since social and new media emerged. The next section of our research addresses issues of control and censorship of web-based media and social media that is proliferating throughout the South Caucasus.

# Social Media and the Blurring of "Journalist" Lines

It is clear that the South Caucasus region is increasingly going online, although the degree of movement varies among the three countries and within each of them. Overall, the Internet penetration

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[32] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Georgia," U.S. State Department, 2013, available at [http://www.state.gov].

[33] "Georgian National Study, November 9-21, 2012," International Republican Institute, Baltic Surveys Ltd. / The Gallup Organization, and Institute of Polling and Marketing, 2012, available at [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2013_February_8_Survey_of_Georgian_Public_Opinion_November_9_21_2012.pdf].

[34] "OSCE Media Freedom Representative Presents Legal Review of Georgian Broadcasting Law Amendments," Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Representative on Freedom of the Media, Press Release, 25 March, 2013, available at [http://www.osce.org/fom/100312].

[35] *Freedom of the Press 2013*, p. 8.

[36] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012: Georgia."

[37] *Media Sustainability Index 2013: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, p. 161.

[38] D.L. Wilcox, *The Potential of the Advertising Industry in Georgia to Sustain an Independent Media*, Scholar Research Brief, International Research & Exchanges Board for CEE Research, Vienna, 2012, p. 1.

rate as of 30 June, 2012 was calculated as 28.4 percent in Georgia, 50 percent in Azerbaijan, and 60.6 percent in Armenia.[39] Interestingly—and in a trend replicated across much of the world—traditional media in Georgia are going online, both to disseminate Internet versions of their stories, visual material, and audio material through their own websites and to post information on blogs and Facebook and, via YouTube, to exchange video information.[40]

A more complex situation arises from the proliferation of social media outlets such as blogs and websites. Also the escalating ease of access to such outlets by would-be communicators blurs traditional borders between "journalists" and "non-journalists," whether in democratic, semi-democratic or non-democratic countries. This trend raises critical questions for governments seeking to control free expression and dissent, for press rights advocates seeking to defend free expression, and for the citizenry deciding whom to trust as a reliable and credible source of news and information about public affairs. These questions include: who is a journalist? how can information and communication technology (ICT) be used to fill the civil society role of journalism in non-democratic countries? and can governments justifiably regulate ICT without impairing the free expression rights of the press and of non-journalists?

As Bowe, Freedman, and Blom observed, "Around the world, social media offer an informal virtual space for citizens who feel disenfranchised to connect socially. But for those who live in countries such as the three former Soviet republics of the South Caucasus—where free expression is curtailed and official news outlets are under government censorship—…ICT offers an increasingly important alternative vehicle for political expression…"[41] The importance of such alternative venues for public discourse is evident. In Azerbaijan, for example, "in the absence of freedom in the traditional media, blogs are used to comment on political developments, and YouTube to post videos showing mass protests and crackdowns at rallies."[42] And Chedia observed, "In the last few years, the Georgian electronic media have abandoned political issues to concentrate on entertainment, which means that the political parties and political figures have moved, albeit partially, to the virtual sphere to discuss public and political issues; this, in turn, has encouraged the social media."[43]

That avoidance—whether by choice or by force—of public affairs coverage by traditional media, coupled with increased availability of technology, explains in part why the public is turning increasingly to non-traditional media as sources of information and opinion. For example, most Armenians own mobile phones, many of which are used for Web access. Sixty percent of Internet users have social network profiles, with the Russian site Odnoklassniki about 6.5 times more popular than Facebook; and one-third own personal computers.[44] The same study found that 67 percent of Armenians do not read online newspapers or have an opinion on their trustworthiness. Also, there are significant differences in new media and social media access in the capital area compared to other parts of a country.

But even more telling in its implications is public attitude toward these alternatives to traditional or mainstream media. On the one hand, Pearce reported: "Armenians are overwhelmingly unsure of the independence of online sources," with 61 percent unable to express an opinion on whether social networking or online newspapers are trustworthy. "However, Armenians who did offer an opinion were much more likely to believe online sources to be independen[t] of government and

[39] See: "Internet Usage in Asia," Internet World Statistics, 2013, available at [http://internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm].

[40] See: B. Chedia, "The New Media and Transformation of the Public Political Sphere in Georgia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, 2011, pp. 143-150.

[41] B.J. Bowe, E. Freedman, and R. Blom, "Cosmopolitanism and Suppression of Cyber-Dissent in the Caucasus: Obstacles and Opportunities for Social Media and the Web," *Journal of Media Sociology*, Vol. 3, Issues 1-4, 2011, p. 6.

[42] *Media Sustainability Index 2013: The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia*, p. 147.

[43] B. Chedia, op. cit., p. 144.

[44] See: K. Pearce, op. cit.

business influence."[45] On the other hand, a U.S. State Department report about Armenia said, "Online Web sites were the country's most independent information sources. Social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, exerted a small but growing influence on social discourse."[46]

In addition, mere access to the Internet does not automatically mean that citizens regularly use it as a source of political information. A national survey conducted in November 2012—the month after Georgia's parliamentary election triggered a regime change—found that 41 percent of respondents read political news on the Web at least once or twice a week, and only 16 percent did so daily; 42 percent reported never reading political news online. The percentages were smaller for Internet users who obtain other forms of online political information at least once or twice weekly; watch political videos (28 percent); read political blogs (21 percent); visit party websites (14 percent); participate in political discussions (3.5 percent); and communicate with politicians (2.8 percent).[47]

Some scholars urge caution against having high expectations for ICT as a transformative force from authoritarianism to democracy in the region. "ICTs are almost always associated with utopic visions that imply societies will become more egalitarian and encourage new forms of communication practices that will transform the relationship between governments and the demos," Buente and Hajibayova write in a study of digital citizenship in the South Caucasus. "However, nation states that place a high priority on controlling information within their regimes demonstrate an impressive ability to shape the development of ICTs in ways that further centralization and restriction of citizen freedoms."[48]

In its annual *Freedom on the Net* report, Freedom House[49] ranks Georgia as "free" and Azerbaijan as "partly free" in terms of Internet access and controls. The report does not include Armenia but the U.S. State Department (2012a) human rights report for 2010 said, "There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or credible reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chat rooms. Individuals and groups could engage in the expression of views via the Internet, including by e-mail."

Despite Georgia's "free" rating by Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press*[50] report, bloggers and other Internet users in that country have been concerned about an existing 2011 law that they say permits police to monitor e-mails—including those of political dissidents—without a court order.[51] Recent events also raise questions about the degree of Internet freedom in Azerbaijan, including the arrest of journalists. A local advocacy group, the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, said they include the executive director and the editor-in-chief of Khayal television, a contributor to the newspaper Millatim, bloggers, and top editors at two news websites. An aide to the president, however, told an Internet Governance Forum in November 2012: "Bloggers are not persecuted in Azerbaijan and not one is in prison at present… They can easily express themselves. That proves there is freedom of the [I]nternet in Azerbaijan."[52]

Governments have technological means to deny access to particular content within their borders, such as blockage of servers and domains; mandatory licensing or registration of Internet sites;

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[45] Ibid., p. 8.

[46] "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011: Armenia."

[47] See: "Georgian National Study, November 9-21, 2012."

[48] W. Buente, L. Hajibayova, "Digital Citizenship in the South Caucasus: A Comparative Analysis between Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan," Paper accepted by the 7th GigaNet Symposium, Baku, Azerbaijan, 5 November, 2012, pp. 2, 3.

[49] See: "Freedom on the Net," Freedom House, 2012.

[50] See: *Freedom of the Press 2013*.

[51] See: M. Vardiashvili, "Georgian Web Users Fear Intrusive Controls," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 24 June, 2011, available at [http://iwpr.net/report-news/georgian-web-users-fear-intrusive-controls].

[52] I. Abbasov, "Web Freedom Claims Ring False in Azerbaijan," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, 10 November, 2012, available at [http://iwpr.net/report-news/web-freedom-claims-ring-false-azerbaijan].

encompassing these forms of communication in libel law; and surveilling individual Internet accounts.[53]

Perhaps the most famous anti-social media event came in Azerbaijan where two bloggers were charged with "hooliganism" for their YouTube posting of a video showing a donkey giving a mock government news conference. The arrest of Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli drew international attention. Their defense lawyer attributed political motives to the charges, but authorities countered that it was simply a criminal case. Both men spent more than a year in jail. After his release, Milli told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that he was uncertain about the reasons for his arrest but assumed it was for "just for telling the truth, for free thinking, for free expression, and this video was part of it." He described himself as a cross between a social activist, blogger and politician and said he planned to continue blogging and added, "I think Internet deprivation is a new form of torture for people of our generation."[54] Milli told an interviewer, "A new-media revolution is taking place in Azerbaijan."[55]

Meanwhile, regimes increasingly use social media to promote their own agendas, disseminate their own viewpoints, attack their own critics, and bypass independent and oppositional media by taking their messages directly to the public. For example, by fall 2011, the Georgian prime minister had 24,744 virtual friends on Facebook, the parliamentary speaker had more than 20,000 and the mayor of Tbilisi had 42,815. In response, Speaker David Bakradze said, "Any power that thinks it necessary to communicate regularly with the people should use the social networks."[56]

A government's role can be more sinister than merely building a roster of social media "friends," according to a study in Azerbaijan by Pearce and Kendzior. In what is labeled "networked authoritarianism," they found that the regime manipulated digitally mediated social networks and dissuaded frequent Web users from political activism, such as supporting protests. Even so, they cite the rising number of Facebook users as evidence that the regime's "campaign against social media has so far been unsuccessful."[57]

## *Conclusion*

Independent journalism along the lines of Western models remains severely impaired in the South Caucasus by broadly-held societal views of the appropriate role of the mass media in comparatively young and developing countries such as the three we focus on in this study.

Instead of the independent watchdog role generally accepted in the West, ordinary citizens and governmental officials in the South Caucasus region often argue that the press should serve as an agent of state-building and nationalism and that its principal duty is not owed to the citizenry but to the country and its government of the moment. One ramification is that many citizens are led to believe that the press should not be fully free to criticize government and public officials. That attitude, in turn, poses a substantial obstacle to securing public support for sustainable, independent media organizations.

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[53] B.J. Bowe, E. Freedman, and R. Blom, op. cit.

[54] K. Ismayilova, "Freed Azerbaijani Blogger Says Year without Internet Was 'Torture,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 19 November, 2010, available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/Freed_Azerbaijani_Blogger_Says_Year_Without_Internet_Was_Torture/2224983.html].

[55] C. Bigg, "Azerbaijani Opposition Blogger Says 'Democratic Revolution' Is Approaching," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 6 March, 2013, available at [http://www.rferl.org/content/donkey-blogger-emin-mili/24921148.html].

[56] B. Chedia, op. cit., p. 145.

[57] K.E. Pearce, S. Kendzior, "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 62, 2012, p. 295.

At the same time, incidents of press rights violations, new restrictive legislation, and operational impediments to transparent governance should continue to raise concerns and protests from media rights defenders and multi-governmental entities such as the OSCE.

Meanwhile, mass media scholars and advocates should remember that Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have their own rich histories, religious heritages, cultural values, political environments, and governmental structures, relationships with neighbors, and economic resources and imperatives. Thus it is unrealistic and, indeed, dangerous to assume that one size—one model of press constraints, regulations, and rights—will fit all three. Thus we can expect the pace of improvements in the mass media situation to be uneven and uncoordinated within each country and within the region.

As for future research, the South Caucasus provides mass media scholars with a venue for a wide range of qualitative and quantitative studies into topics relevant to authoritarian and post-authoritarian journalism and communication. Among them are questions of media economics and financial sustainability; social media use; journalism ethics and practices; advertiser influence on news content; government and nongovernmental control of content; media agenda-setting; the roles of independent, state-owned, and oppositional press; university-level journalism education; professional development; self-censorship; newsroom diversity; minority media; cross-border collaborative reporting projects; and access to information.

For example, how do professional journalists see themselves, their jobs, and their media organizations? How do journalists cover public affairs, particularly controversial topics and issues, and how do they use sources and strive for—or ignore—fairness and balance? How well do university journalism programs prepare students to succeed in the rapidly changing world of mass media? How are the Internet and social media reshaping the ways the region's citizenry get news, including ways that bypass traditional media? What impact does the foreign press—from Russia, Western Europe, the United States, Turkey, Iran, and elsewhere—have on domestic news agendas? What economic models might prove viable in the region? How do NGOs attempt to influence news coverage?

Scholars should continue to examine public attitudes toward the press, including levels of trust and credibility. That includes analyzing whether they coincide or conflict with journalists' on-the-ground experiences and media analysts' observations. Attitudes surely change in the context of political and other events. To illustrate, a series of fifteen national surveys in Georgia between October 2005 and November 2012 found that from a low of 10 percent to a high of 20 percent of respondents believe that their mass media are "totally free" for purposes of expressing "various political views" without "government control over media content." Those who believe the press is "somewhat free" hit a low point of 35 percent in June 2009 and peaked at 56 percent right after the October 2012 elections. During the same period, those who believe the press is "not free at all" ranged from a low of 7 percent to a high of 16 percent; there was a 4 percent improvement from 14 to 10 percent between the pre- and post-2012 election surveys.[58]

Finally, what are appropriate roles for trainers, educators, and organizations from outside the region in advancing journalism skills and press freedom? Journalism, press rights advocacy, civil society groups, and news organizations, provide training and instruction for professionals and university students in the region. So do the OSCE and U.S. government-sponsored programs Among them are Fulbright and other media scholars from the United States who teach university journalism students and Western professionals who conduct trainings at such institutions as the Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management in Tbilisi, a joint venture of the International Center for Journal-

[58] See: "Georgian National Study, November 9-21, 2012."

ists and the Georgian Institute for Public Affairs, and the Caucasus Media Institute in Armenia, which offers courses on media technology and journalism techniques and workshops for mid-career journalists. In their study of an Armenian radio news program, Torosyan and Starck cautioned that "journalists in post-communist countries should avoid blind acceptance of assistance and expertise without examining the ideological strings attached to foreign aid… Armenian journalists should have as much decision-making power as American or European consultants or administrators who decide what kind of training or textbooks should be used in those countries."[59] Therefore it may be useful for researchers to explore the practical and long-term impact, if any, on South Caucasus journalists and news organizations—of Western trainers who promote "democratic journalism"—so-called "media missionaries."

[59] G. Torosyan, K. Starck, op. cit., p. 215.