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The Current State of Economic Journalism in Kyrgyzstan

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Article at a glance

- Kyrgyzstan suffers from a lack of trained reporters capable of synthesizing economic information for public consumption.
- Quality economic reporting facilitates a healthy dialogue between business, the government, and the public. It is necessary for building market-oriented, democratic reform.
- Journalists in Kyrgyzstan must take responsibility for developing public understanding of economic issues.

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Introduction

When reading Kyrgyzstan's print media, it is striking to see how journalists are so far removed from the economy and structure of government. Many journalists still do not understand the difference between a municipal administration and a territorial administration, even though local self-government has existed in the country for more than 15 years. The economy ranks last in the priorities of most Kyrgyz news media outlets. Instead, both in print and on the air, politics is the most popular topic. Most visitors to Kyrgyzstan are immediately struck by its citizens' intense preoccupation with personnel shuffles in the [Kyrgyz] White House and the kindred ties between various public figures. It is painfully obvious how little the local press is interested in the development of Kyrgyz corporations, banks and other financial institutions, or overall economic trends.

Many journalists contend that the economy is of interest only to a small circle of people. Indeed, writing about the economy and educating the public is far more difficult than speculating about political scandals. Yet focusing solely on political subjects and ignoring economic issues is dangerous. This type of press diverts public attention away from other important issues and can encourage excessive criticism. If journalists are to make positive contributions to democratic and economic development, they must educate themselves and their audience to understand and appreciate the economy. Journalists themselves must first understand what is going on – well enough to explain these events and ideas to their readers and viewers.

Current Media Representation of Economic Information

Economic journalism must expand beyond a handful of experts who write long, complex articles for an equally small group of knowledgeable readers. The current market for economic publications barely exists in Kyrgyzstan, and economic journalism geared toward the public is simply nonexistent. Economic information currently consists of government press releases or news items that companies pay newspapers to print as part of corporate public relations campaigns.

The government press releases often appear in print in a form revised only slightly by journalists (in which case they are unintelligible, complicated, or overly bureaucratic), or in a form distorted beyond recognition by incompetent journalists who repackage the information as they [mis]understand it.

AKI-Press (business.akipress.org) is a notable exception, posting news from companies free of charge. Some analytical information about the economy can also be found at the news website www.kabar.kg and in the newspaper *Obshchestvenniy Reiting* (Public Rating). Recently, some new publications have attempted to present a broader range of economic news (such as the newspaper *De Fakto*), in addition to several specialized publications geared toward a narrow professional audience (such as a journal for accountants, the publication *Bankovskiy Vestnik* [Banking News], and others).

Still, most economic reporting in the Kyrgyz media suffers from an absence of expert assessment and analysis-based forecasting. Journalists write about economic developments only after the fact, and make no attempt to present expert opinions. Analysis that does occur is usually focused on sensationalized coverage of the controversies surrounding large, established businesses, companies that are undergoing privatization, or corporate takeovers.

Television does not offer programs devoted to economic subjects, either. Depending on the relevance and profile of a particular economic event (such as the possibility of Kyrgyzstan joining the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative), economic issues might be covered in a news program or discussed on a talk show, only to disappear from the media as public interest wanes. Reporters are not in the habit of monitoring further developments, taking their coverage of a given issue to its logical conclusion, or covering a certain

Kyrgyzstan's Media Lacks...

- Public demand for economic news
- Sufficient, readily understandable economic news
- Systematic presentation of economic news
- Economic analysis and forecasting

economic topic on a regular basis. In a country where the public is not yet in the habit of demanding economic information, journalists must report on topics beyond what the public demands.

Further, the information resources that present a relatively wide range of economic information are not readily available to the average consumer, be it a web-based publication or a limited-circulation newspaper like *Ekonomika, Biznes, Banki* (Economics, Business, and Banking). News sources that are available to the average consumer give little attention to economic topics.

Journalists, Editors, and Owners

One ongoing problem that could have long-term consequences for the journalism profession is that intelligent and talented people are leaving jobs in the news media. Their reasons are not necessarily financial, and have more to do with the declining prestige of the profession. The list of formally recognized, professional economic journalists in Kyrgyzstan is very short. Moreover, many of these journalists represent the older generation, and retain a Soviet mindset unchallenged by the fresh perspectives of younger journalists. Additionally, there are very few young journalists entering the profession who are able write on economic topics – Kyrgyzstan’s institutions of higher education are not adequately training younger journalists to cover economic subjects.

Editors present another problem. Even when a reporter understands economic development issues and writes an article, there is much uncertainty as to whether the editor will understand and publish the article. Most editors were trained during the Soviet era; they often do not understand market economics and have no desire to learn about new topics. Recently, a journalist reported that his editor had refused to publish an article about the causes of low pay in Kyrgyzstan’s public sector on the grounds that the topic itself was “uninteresting” and would make the newspaper “too boring.”

Newspaper owners represent yet another level of the problem. Until recently, most newspapers were

Example 1: Why Economic Journalism Development is Necessary

The website of a well-known news agency posted a lengthy and highly critical article about an attempt to introduce performance evaluation for government employees at the Ministry of Industry. The author expressed considerable indignation that officials were trying to relate work performance to salary bonuses and various non-financial incentives. The entire article was based on the presumption that it is utterly impossible to even attempt to evaluate an employee’s performance, and therefore impossible to relate work results to salaries and other benefits. It never occurred to the journalist that employees must be evaluated, or that incentives encourage good work performance.

founded on largely political goals. However, owners have begun to realize that media outlets are businesses, and they are starting to welcome content that helps their papers sell well. At the same time, there is a stubborn myth within media circles that the economy is of interest to only a small segment of consumers.

Still, public interest in the economy is very high, as indicated by the findings of a 2007 study of public opinion and priorities. The study shows that the economy ranks as the second-most important issue among Kyrgyzstan’s citizens, after unemployment, while the third-most important topic is corruption. Notably, all three of these subjects are essentially economic. Further, it was reported that 90 percent of all readers and viewers are interested in food, health, comfort, goods and services, and politics – all these issues that have an economic element. (See the Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll on page 4.)

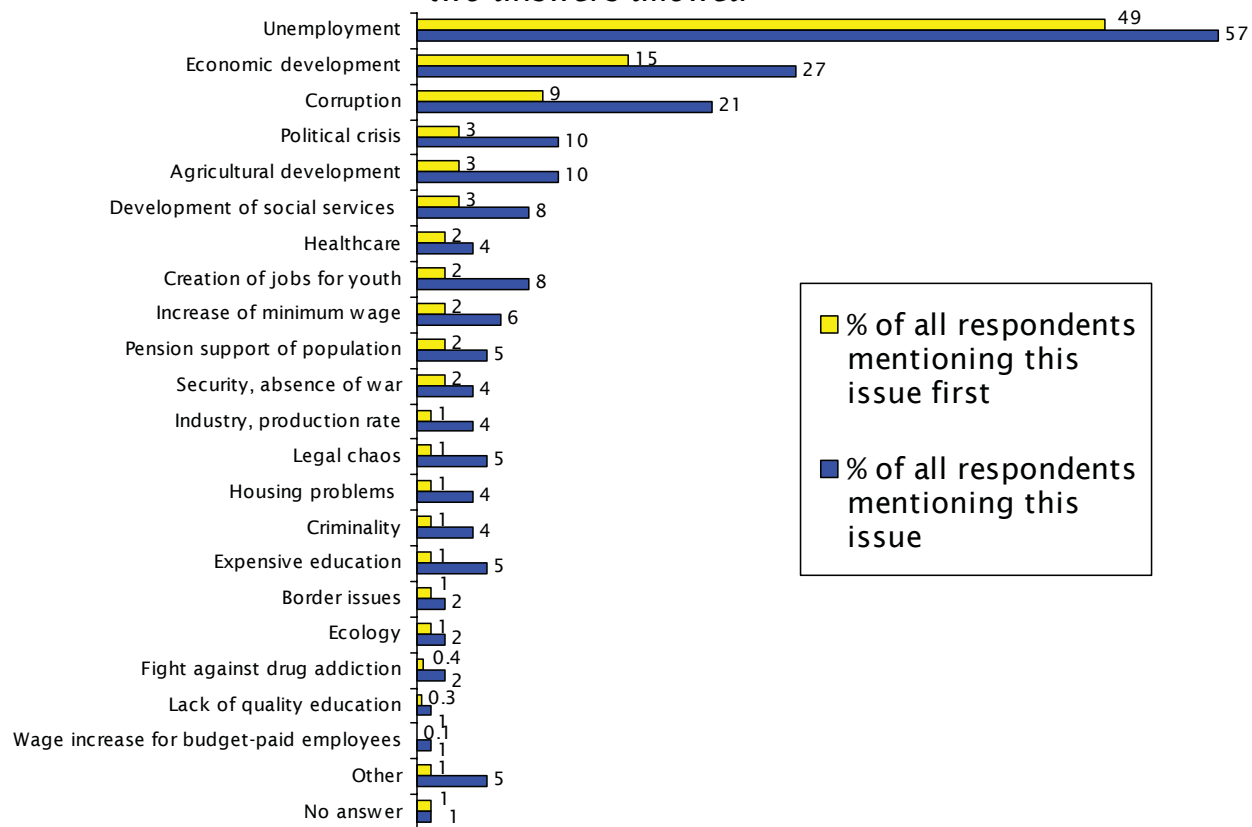
Training Economic Journalists

Journalism departments at Kyrgyz universities do teach economics, but generally only in the form of abstract theory. Lecturers often do not take the topic seriously, asking, *Why teach economics to these journalists? Economics is a complicated discipline that requires many years of study; how are these pen-pushers going to grasp such a difficult subject?* Currently, Kyrgyz journalism departments teach economic theory for

Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll

Most important issues Kyrgyzstan is facing

two answers allowed



Source: IRI, Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization, Kyrgyzstan National Opinion Poll, May 2007

Available from the International Republican Institute at www.iri.org/eurasia/Kyrgyzstan/pdfs/2007-07-03-Kyrgyzstan.ppt

just one semester, while giving a greater focus to journalistic theory and other less practical topics.

Journalism as a profession is learned in hands-on experience; good journalists apply economics, sociology, political science, and other disciplines in their writing or reporting. Journalism departments in Kyrgyzstan must shift their focus to bridge the gap between the formal training they provide to aspiring journalists and the reality of journalistic practice. While necessary, moving in this direction will not be easy; some departments' attempts to bring in practicing, experienced economic journalists as adjunct instructors have failed because the pay for such instructors does not allow the journalists to recoup the expense of their time.

Short-term courses and schools

Numerous efforts—often on the part of international donors – have been made to teach students and practicing journalists how to process and present economic news. In addition to a 2007-2008 series of seminars conducted by the Institute for Public Policy with support from the Center for International Private Enterprise, some examples of journalism development offered in recent years include:

- 2005: The Soros Foundation conducted a seminar on analytical journalism that included a small economic component.
- 2006: AKI-Press, in conjunction with Ed Net Academy and with support from the Asia Universal Bank, established a school of economic journalism.

- 2007: The International Business Council, in conjunction with the Congress of Business Associations and with support from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Osh office) held a seminar on business and the news media.

The implementation of these courses highlighted some problem areas. The organizers noted a lack of well-prepared instructors who had a good grasp of economics and were also familiar with the specific characteristics of news media. The few such instructors who implemented these efforts said that the initial preparation of the participants in these seminars was poor, and that the participants often lacked even a basic grasp of economics. Further, some talented, well-rounded students who attended the courses would have made good journalists, but were considering other professions instead.

Some Kyrgyz business entities have shown an interest in developing economic journalism, notably, the International Business Council, the Congress of Business Associations, and a number of banks and corporations. However, these entities have not yet come together to pursue their interests jointly. Concerted, cooperative initiatives are essential to change and re-form the mindset of Kyrgyzstan's journalistic corps, which has long been distorted by political passions.

Areas for Improvement

All in all, Kyrgyz journalists have made great strides toward modernizing their profession, striving for objectivity and lack of bias. Unfortunately, they have tended to interpret these goals as “no commentary or synthesis – just the facts, and nothing but the facts.” Instituting a measure of analysis in reporting, especially regarding economic issues, would certainly help Kyrgyz consumers understand economic information and would foster the kind of dialogue between government, business, and society that is the foundation for market-oriented, democratic reform.

To fulfill this role successfully, journalists must:

Example 2: Why Economic Journalism Development is Necessary

When the government was considering a usage-based fee for stationary telephones (operated by Kyrgyz Telecom), the Association of Communications Operators (not Kyrgyz Telecom itself) sought to explain to the public why the usage-based system would be a positive change. The association acted in the belief that if the national operator were to go under, all communications companies would suffer because they are closely linked technically. The government was reluctant to introduce a usage-based fee because it feared public backlash. Yet calculations showed that, if such a fee were introduced, average citizens (whom the government is trying to protect) would *not* pay higher rates – instead, it would be businesspeople who conduct the bulk of their business by phone who would pay fees more reflective of their usage. Under the system in place, average citizens who paid their phone bills on time were essentially subsidizing the businesspeople's lengthy telephone conversations.

The problem concerned the entire country, and should have been an issue journalists sought to address, as it affected three groups:

- The ***national communications operator*** (providing communication services in rural areas and serving other strategic national interests), which needed the usage-based fee to modernize its system
- A large number of low-income ***citizens***, who stood to save money under the usage-based fee system, as people who use their phones less often would pay less
- The ***government***, responsible for both the country's strategic interests and the interests of its citizens

The association encountered a challenge from the media over two issues. First, the media was unwilling to take up the subject without extra compensation from the association. Second, journalists were unable to write an intelligible and well-reasoned article. Having rejected various drafts, the communications association turned to an independent expert. In this case, the media failed in a number of areas, including their mandate to educate the public and foster information exchange and informed debate.

- Select, process, and report economic information generated by the state.
- Select, process, and report economic information generated by sources outside the country (i.e., from world economic actors).

- Ensure effective information exchange between the public and business by all available means, including news-reporting, analytical journalism, and promotional materials.
- Promote effective information exchange between the public and foreign investors.

By focusing on these four things, journalists can accomplish a variety of tasks, including:

- Exercising public oversight of government actions in the economic realm – for example, journalists can reveal (or discourage) misguided economic decisions.
- Monitoring trends in various sectors of the market, and alerting the public, businesspeople, and the government when these trends begin to take a negative character.
- Monitoring the quality of the government’s regulatory influence on the economy and the impact of various government decisions on the market.

Unfortunately, journalists in Kyrgyzstan often learn about the government’s economic mistakes from the government itself, when it has no other option but to admit its own incompetence or negligence. Ideally, journalists should be able to discuss the potential ramifications of a given decision in the preliminary stages of policy formation, and should be able to analyze and process expert assessments before the effects are apparent. Journalists must also be mindful of the differences among groups in Kyrgyz society, and must make their message relevant to these different target groups. For example, there is a small segment of Kyrgyzstan’s citizens that travel outside the country, while most people rarely venture farther than the county seat. Only a small percentage of the population communicates with the rest of the world using e-mail or other web-based communications. At the same time as many people consider an elementary education sufficient, only a few citizens are able to choose among Kyrgyzstan’s most prestigious schools when deciding where to educate their children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In addition to the above factors currently constraining a thriving culture of economic journalism, there are some problems with information availability:

- Government departments often lack information offices (some such offices exist, but they perform poorly). These offices must provide information as well as make that information understandable to journalists.
- Kyrgyzstan lacks information-generating institutions, such as rating services, sociological research centers, and consulting firms.
- Statistical data is sold to news media outlets, rather than being provided free of charge.

To solve these problems, there must be a concerted effort to train professional “interpreters” of economic information, targeting instructors, journalism students, and working journalists. There is a need for quality textbooks and training modules based on practical experience. To address the problem of capable people leaving the news media, it is essential to enhance the prestige of the profession. For example, a regular national competition in the field of business journalism could be established under the aegis of the government or the president, promoted by the production of special television programs and endorsed by the business community and international organizations.

It is not only journalists, but also other participants in economic processes – the state, international donors, and the business community – who need to play a constructive role in educating domestic investors and consumers. The government should encourage the media to concentrate less on political scandals and more on the economic issues affecting the country. Donors need to understand the importance of economic reporting and the responsibility of the media. The business community must recognize its stake in the process. Most importantly, journalists themselves must be willing to take on this hugely important responsibility.

This article is an adapted translation of a report originally commissioned by the Institute for Public Policy in Bishkek.

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