

ACHILLES' HEEL OF THE KYRGYZ TV ANALYTICAL PROGRAMS

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Kyrgyz TV channels ignore experts in political analysis. TV hosts use teleprompters for texts they have neither prepared nor written, remaining simply middlemen between the viewers and channel bosses who are imposing their flat judgments and one-sided viewpoints on their audience.

Largely influenced by the Russian media, like it or not, Kyrgyzstan's viewers are becoming used to the professional level of Russian news analytical programs, such as "Postskriptum" ("Postscript", TVZ), "Itogi" ("Outcomes", TV6), "Vremena" ("Times", ORT), and "Zerkalo" ("Mirror", RTR). But these are the products of a foreign news system. Kyrgyz TV has only two similar programs – "Jetigen" (KTR) and "Apta" (KOORT) – pale imitations of their Russian counterparts. The programs boasting they are news analytical shows are, in fact, weekly newsreels and only contain raw material. Both programs commit the sin of using excessive amounts of PR, designed to offer news and ideological support to the government.

RECENT CONCEPT

Experts believe the dearth of in-depth analytical programs in Kyrgyz television is, firstly, an indication of incompetence. As a matter of fact, the concept of news analysis only came into vogue in the Kyrgyz media a year or two ago. For a long time Kyrgyz journalism had been, and still is, predominantly one-sided, with authors' personal comments and opinions prevailing. By transplant-

ing the major principles of western communication, Kyrgyzstan's journalism believes that merely presenting all conflicting opinions gives a balanced analysis of the situation.

NO UNDERSTANDING

"Very few Kyrgyzstani reporters have a proper understanding of what analytical material is all about," says Zhyrgalbek Kasabolotov, director of *Infor-Center Bishkek*. "Most of them think that if you carry the different views of a situation and bundle them together you get the desired news analysis. But any analytical material must involve a problem statement, the search for causes, the presentation of possible solutions and some forecasting. The Kyrgyz media can currently boast very few publications that take in all these components. But perhaps the most dangerous thing by far is that the majority of reports claiming to be from analytical staff actually suffer from being politically engaged. However, news analysis has nothing to do with PR (government servicing) or criticism. It presupposes the all-round study of a problem."

According to Marina Sivashova, a lecturer in international journalism at the American University in Kyrgyzstan, news analytical programs broadcast on Kyrgyzstan

TV are not highly rated compared to Russian programs. They tend to sink into the squaring of accounts with opponents making caustic remarks about the political opposition. Any analysis, as such, is absent.

LOW PROFESSIONALISM

The absence of competent personnel, capable of providing quality analysis of foreign or domestic political problems, constitutes a serious challenge to the Kyrgyz media. "Kyrgyz television is simply uncompetitive," says parliament member Kubatbek Baibolov. "It does not have programs focusing on concrete problems. That's why intelligent Kyrgyz viewers prefer to watch Russian television. In fact, I rarely watch the national channels because what they show is just gibberish and blatant mediocrity."

"Analytical journalism is a very hard job," says Marina Sivashova. "To do it professionally one has to know a lot of things, have a good grip of the situation, keep track of trends, get an insight into the heart of the matter and be able to predict events. We don't have television hosts who meet these requirements. Even the use of correct speech is a rarity in television. I have wondered for a long time: which is most important, a host's personality or the program's concept, and have come to the conclusion that an analytical program depends 99 percent on the host's individuality."

The popularity of Russian analytical programs is built on the

charisma of their hosts, who have been involved in analytical journalism for years. While political analysis in Kyrgyzstan remains the domain of political scientists and sociologists, Kyrgyz TV channels are reluctant to turn to these experts. TV hosts use teleprompters for texts they have neither prepared nor written, remaining simply middlemen between the viewers and channel bosses wishing to impose one-sided views that are all too apparent to the intelligent viewer because the judgments and statements are unprofessional, inconsistent and insincere.

MOSCOW AS MODEL

The majority of private channels are “hooked up” to the image and reputation of Moscow’s electronic media whose programs are used to replace local material. “Our company’s produce accounts for only 10 hours a week,” says Gulnara Chokubayeva, editor of Independent Bishkek Television (NBT). “This is due to the lack of funding necessary to produce our own programs, as well as the lack of skilled personnel. With respect to analytical programs, I don’t believe there are analysts in television or across the republic at large capable of reporting news analysis as professionally as the Russian channels are.”

“Hosting an analytical program requires unending work on the subject of the analysis”, says Emil Aliev, member of the opposition *Ar-Namys* party’s political council. “This calls for considerable funding. From my contacts with editors and reporters I know what financial constraints the channels are facing and the shortage of professionals they are suffering from that prevents them from producing quality newscasts, let

alone analytical programs.”

State-owned channels cannot afford to be objective as they are appointed to play the game by the political establishment. Their management is still hostage to the Soviet-era thesis of the state ordering those news policies it deems best, and the state-owned media acting as an obedient servant responsible for bringing those policies to life.

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Although editors deny they are under clear-cut instructions from above as to what is allowed and what is not, they have made a rule never to question those government acts that finance their activities. Because of budgetary financing, the state-controlled media cannot afford sober analysis or publications that run counter to government interests. The most recent example of news being hushed up – and accordingly left unanalyzed – by the state-controlled media was when they ignored the fact that in late December 2001, Zamira Sydykova, editor-in-chief of the opposition *Res Publica* newspaper, did not come back from an overseas trip because she asked for political asylum in Austria. It was only the private NBT channel that announced the news, although without going into what caused the move and what repercussions it may have on the country’s free press and Kyrgyzstan’s image abroad.

A thorough analysis of society’s woes means not only citing events but also mentioning real figures that

initiate and get involved in these events. An author’s interpretation of events always entails quoting the claims of political actors, politicians and officials. Such claims often grow into suits and multi-million dollar fines. Therefore, motivated by the instinct of self-preservation, the owners of electronic media choose to carry comment-free newscasts rather than analytical

materials, however in-depth they may be.

AFRAID OF TAKING RISK

“Analytical TV programs are absent mainly because news in this country is still closed,” says Emil Aliev, a formerly national security officer. He adds, “Reporting in Kyrgyzstan is dominated by the government’s rigid regimentation. Network heads do not want to take risks for fear of legal prosecution. Because there is no independent judiciary available in this country, any unbiased – and therefore unwelcome, in the government’s eyes – analysis sets off a government reaction. This indirect pressure brought to bear on the media, in turn, causes the news to shrink.” Marina Sivashova believes that in the current political context even professional analysts specializing in political and social sciences would be banned from analytical programs that called a spade a spade. That’s why newscasts are likely to prevail for years to come while analytical programs will stay in the shade.

The above-mentioned factors also account for the absence of any analytical material in Kyrgyzstan's press. Even if it does appear it is mostly written by professional political analysts and sociologists rather than by staff reporters. "News analysis," says Marina Sivashova, "faces a lot of difficulties as it fights its way into the media, with analysts having to disguise the real purport of their material. Covert texts lose clarity, though. The hidden message can be grasped but only by a narrow circle of people aware of the context. In the end it remains a secret to most readers what the author actually intended to say."

With the news being too restricted, Kyrgyzstani analytical journalism has increasingly made use of the Internet in its develop-

ment. Being outside the jurisdiction of the Mass Media Law, the Internet grants a certain relief from legal prosecution by politicians or government officials. Accordingly, authors can afford to theorize, suggest or comment on the Internet. Of equal importance is the fact that the financial terms offered by websites carrying news analytical items are more beneficial and, thus, more stimulating for authors. Besides which, these are sites largely designed for a professional audience rather than the broad public, so no adaptation is needed.

VIEWERS' COMPETENCE

However, there less than one percent of Kyrgyzstan's population is capable of competently following the news, professionally evaluating social and political challeng-

es, and overlooking the PR eulogies to focus in on the subject matter. It is this one percent group of professionals that needs quality analytical information. Paradoxically, this category is predominantly comprised of government officers. However, civil services do not produce any analytical material, even for official use, due – again – to the absence of professionals and funds.

Thus, the establishment that restricts and controls the new eventually finds itself cut off from unprejudiced reports. Not for any PR reasons but, rather, for being able to give a correct assessment of the situation and, on this basis, making effective administrative and political decisions. Hence, the numerous blunders that the government regrets later on...