

SITUATION IN CENTRAL ASIAN MEDIA MARKETS

Elmira Toktogulova, CIMERA, Kyrgyzstan

The formation of Central Asian media markets is taking place amid economic meltdown. It is this factor that accounts for the absence of serious business rivalry as far as attracting new audiences is concerned, thus adversely affecting local mass media standards.

When we talk of business rivalry it is most frequently about a spectrum of supply and demand in offering certain goods or services. What is a consumer – reader, listener or viewer – really looking for in the media market? Apparently, it is prompt and accurate news reports focusing on what the public regards as interesting and important as regards forming an opinion. Consequently, media competition assumes the shape of rivalry in furnishing the consumer with this kind of service in the best possible way. In this issue of *Media Insight Central Asia* we have undertaken to review the present situation of the media market in Central Asia and reveal ongoing trends in the regional media.

WAR OR COMPETITION?

While reviewing the situation in the media markets of Central Asian countries we encountered a problem caused by the fact that media actors treat the very notion of competition differently. Some of the local experts tend to use the word ‘opposition’, instead of competition, indicating that government and private mass media are in a state of “regular war that has its seasonal peaks (during presidential or parliamentary elections, etc.)” (see Yelena Buldakova’s article, MICA-29). When the guns

of ‘media war’ step in, concern for the general public and the social mission of the media step out, so that we can no longer view these ‘fights’ as business rivalry. The head of a private media outlet from Uzbekistan thus described the positions of private and government media: “Subsidized by the state, official papers may afford lower retail prices that frequently do not cover actual printing expenses. State subsidies enable them to reduce advertising rates and thereby lure more advertisers. That’s what is beyond our purse” (see Elparid Khojayev’s article, MICA-29).

Pretty much the same situation has evolved in Kyrgyzstan: the government newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* “is competing with *Vecherny Bishkek* in block advertising, and not without success. Personal announcements appear primarily in *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*,” (see MICA-29). In Kyrgyzstan though, the choice of *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* as an advertising medium is not always accounted for by the fact that this newspaper is run by the government. Most likely, it is its national status, that is to say nationwide scope, that matters here. No private media in Kyrgyzstan, be it a newspaper or broadcaster, has country-wide circulation. This re-

mains a prerogative of the government media – KTR (television and radio broadcasting company), *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (a Russian-language newspaper), and *Kyrgyz Tuusu* (a Kyrgyz-language newspaper). According to journalists from government mass media active in Uzbekistan, their media outlets bear no comparison with their private peers as they have to publish official reports that the general public takes no interest in, on the one hand, and are not empowered to run stories of great social appeal in their present ‘government’ status, on the other (see MICA-29). What we see here is the aftermath of tough censorship that used to regiment the focus of mass media, viewing it as an instrument of ideological influence.

DIGEST AS SOFT OPTION

Borrowing stories written by skilled journalists in foreign countries — just by way of making up for the lack of one’s own — is a feature typical of the media market in Central Asia. In print media this takes the shape of publishing digests, while in electronic media it is the re-transmitting of programs produced by more advanced broadcasters. Russia being the sole country producing programs of high quality in a language that the general public is familiar with, the bulk of reprints and re-transmissions come from there. Russian press digests are fully-fledged players on the media markets in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan,

with good advertising revenues. In Kyrgyzstan, local television and radio broadcasters are re-transmitting Russian television companies' programs, replacing Russian-made commercials with those of local firms. In this context, local television stations vie in signing cooperation agreements with leading Russian channels. Copyrights and ethics are also put on the back burner in this survival race. Of late though, media companies have started making partnership deals, laying down terms for cooperation in the media sector. Brain-picking is a method that the local media is forced to resort to as it lacks favorable conditions to consolidate positions in the market.

IT'S NOT THAT SIMPLE!

"While launching Varorud paper we hoped our paper would sell well if we published the most topical stories on the most burning matters. To all intents and purpos-

es, we were grossly mistaken. The way the media market is developing depends heavily on this country's economic situation. Take Varorud, for one. It's the cheapest paper in Khujand yet, there are very few who can afford to buy it" says Ilkhom Jamolov, the director of Varorud news agency and publisher of a newspaper of the same name in Tajikistan (see MICA No. 29). This is the kind of problem faced by those who decide to engage in news production rather than reaping where one has not sown. Whereas the central media can hope for advertising revenues, the regional ones can't even dream about it: "In the provinces though, media competition is virtually nonexistent because the regional media is pressed for both professionals and cash," says Nicolas Ednoterre, director of Internews Kyrgyzstan (see MICA No. 29). "Successful and financially sound businesses are rather few,

the majority being in economic doldrums and unable to afford advertising. Thus, the papers have no option but to increase sales," writes Elparid Khojayev, a journalist from Tajikistan (see MICA No. 29). Lolita Turayeva, a newspaper editor from Tajikistan, admits that, "considering today's conditions in Dushanbe, newspaper publishing is an extremely costly business. Printing and newsprint charges are too high for most media outlets to afford.

Meanwhile, advertising revenues are a pittance... Surviving is the precise word one can use to describe the state of the newspaper business in Tajikistan today"(see MICA No. 29). As suggested by a journalist from Uzbekistan, Natalya Shulepina, no one cares about readers when the media and journalists themselves have to battle for survival (see Elparid Khojayev's article, MICA No. 29).