

MEDIA MARKET IN UZBEKISTAN: NO ROOM FOR COMPETITION

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Competition in the media market of Uzbekistan is still in its infancy. The low income of journalists is a factor in both the media's inadequate quality and low circulations. Music radio stations and media digests are in a relatively better position.

The end of official censorship in Uzbekistan last May seemed to open up new opportunities for the electronic and print media in this country. Non-standard materials, quite unusual in subject matter, found their way into the newspapers. There are now a number of FM radio stations successfully operating in Tashkent. Local television recently surprised Uzbekistan citizens by its responsiveness in broadcasting, almost immediately after the leading world news agencies, the tragic events that took place in Moscow on October 23-26, 2002, when spectators of the Nord-Ost musical were taken hostage by a group of terrorists in the Dubrovka Street theater center. Only a year ago news reports about the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington appeared on Uzbek television after a three-day delay, as journalists waited for an official permit to broadcast the news. However, censorship has been only one of the factors impeding media development.

STATE MEDIA OUSTED

One of the major challenges confronting the media today is the need to learn how to succeed in competition – otherwise it would be impossible to encourage the journalists' creative endeavor. Advertising remains a key source

of revenue but advertisers are difficult to find. Successful and financially sound businesses are rather few, the majority being in the economic doldrums and unable to afford advertising. Thus, the papers have no option but to increase sales. "Look, commercial publications like Tasvir, Darakchi, Prestizh and some others are drawing potential readers away from us," says Pravda Vostoka's deputy editor-in-chief Gennady Lyu. He continued, "These digests are just reprinting a lot of articles from Russian papers. We cannot do things like that since ours is a government newspaper. It is expected to publish official reports." That is what in Gennady Lyu's opinion doesn't suit readers. The paper's circulation is a mere 9,400 copies – a ridiculous print for a newspaper that has recently turned 85 and boasts to have had a circulation of 200,000 in its better days. The present-day circulation may diminish further following the already announced rise in subscription rates.

This view is also shared by the editor-in-chief of papers Khalk Suzi and Narodnoye Slovo, Adylbek Kaipbergenov, who admits that it is very difficult for state-run publications to compete in the media market. "There are only three daily newspapers in Uzbekistan today coming out five

times a week. These are the Uzbek-language Khalk Suzi as well as the Russian-language Pravda Vostoka and Narodnoye Slovo. These are organs of the government. It sounds great but their circulations are extremely low. This is due to the fact that we have to give most of the space to official reports," says Adylbek Kaipbergenov. Information-wise, though, the weeklies are no rivals to them. However, commercial publications, by running reprints, are able to raise themes that no other official state-run publication can ever afford to touch upon, thus having to lose readership. Journalists too are voicing serious complaints about the funding of state-run media organizations. A sports reporter from Pravda Vostoka, Timur Nizayev, who recently covered the 14th Asian Games in South Korea, states bitterly that his fellow foreign reporters, equipped with notebooks and other up-to-date devices, looked at him with undisguised amazement when he, armed with nothing but a pen and stationery pad, interviewed sportsmen and coaches.

"That was not the first international sports event that I have covered and I can compare our own opportunities with those available to our foreign colleagues. I am ashamed of our poverty. Just look at our wages. I write a lot but get a meager 15,000 sums (equivalent to about US \$12) every two weeks. That's all I get – my wage plus fees," he says. Says Natalya

Shulepina, an environment analyst from the same paper: “The mass media today have no incentives whatsoever to excite the journalists’ interest in searching for new and fresh themes or taking up investigations.

The journalists are rather seeking organizations and individuals that are able to pay for publications.” She admits there are very few media people today who will volunteer to go into the unknown to dig up a theme. Take, for example, environmental journalism – Natalya Shelepina’s previous major and one requiring serious treatment. Actually, it takes more than a week to highlight key points and write an analytical story. But even if published correctly – which is not necessarily the case – it will never be appreciated neither morally nor financially. That’s why there are just a handful of journalists writing on environmental issues. Furthermore, no one seems to be really concerned about readers’ interests in a situation where both media organizations and reporters have to survive on their own. Hence the readers respond by losing interest in papers and circulation falls.

DIGESTS HAVE IT ALL:

Now, what do the rivals of state-run papers say in reply? A manager of Eko commercial weekly, Raphael Burkiyev, believes that the official – state-run, that is – press enjoys a great many privileges. “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 charges and thereby lure more advertisers. That’s what is beyond our purse,” he admits. An experienced

reporter with more than a decade in journalism, Galina Chebakova is justly proud of her brainchild, the weekly “Tasvir”. It boasts a circulation of 60,000 – the greatest of all Russian-language publications.

“In fact, we have also outstripped many Uzbek-language papers in regards edition size,” says Galina Chebakova. She continues, “what is so special about Tasvir? To begin with, it offers a certain group of readers – let’s call them intellectuals – information they are unable to find in any other publication. Formerly, many used to regularly buy or subscribe to several papers and magazines. Now, though, very few can afford a luxury like that. Most buy just one paper. Accordingly, Tasvir tries to collect news reports from Russian periodicals that may interest our readers. Informative, instructive and entertaining. Time has shown that we are on the right track with the paper. Accurate selection is a matter of taste, experience and intuition.”

RADIO AUDIENCES LOW

Whereas the printed press is an arena of latent rivalry between state-run and commercial outlets, competition in the electronic media sector is starting to assume a more explicit form. State-run television and radio, though, stay away from the game, choosing to cling to traditional patterns of business. The sole exception is perhaps Yoshlar (Youth) radio and television channel that is trying to add some variety to its programs. In contrast, FM radio stations, whose number is estimated at 13 (with two more coming) in Tashkent alone, increasingly swing into gear while struggling for an audience. To this end they apply a great mul-

titude of methods, including using technological innovations. Ekho Doliny radio station, for one, unlike the majority of other stations, broadcasts nationwide – while the capacities of the other FM radio stations do not permit them to go beyond Tashkent and its suburbs. Lola Islamova, chief of Ekho Doliny’s news service, says that her radio station was the first to start broadcasting on the Web. Likewise, Radio Khamrokh can boast an audience of its own – primarily drivers whom it informs about road accidents and traffic jams.

Meanwhile, to draw an audience, ORIAT FM radio station ventured on an unusual experiment that helped raise its own popularity rating. On October 22, 2002, the radio station’s anchors spent the day washing cars for all comers – a publicity campaign that was announced in the press and on their own programs. On the other hand, Radio Grand, unlike other predominantly entertaining FM radio stations, gives considerable airtime to home and foreign affairs.

Each FM is in search of its own niche and audience. Regrettably enough, you will not see this competition on television; state-run or commercial. Head of the Journalism Department at the National Uzbek University, Kudrat Ernazarov, believes that there should be competition not only among different media outlets but also within each team of journalists. “The more intensive the rivalry among writers the more captivating the stories offered to the readership. Both readers and viewers should trust journalists,” he says.

Speaking at a recent meeting with media editors-in-chief, the general director of Uzbekistan’s

Information and Press Agency Rustam Shagulyamov said, by way of reproaching the media managers, that ten minutes was enough time for him to grasp the content of all papers and magazines brought to his office every morning. That's how dull and boring they are.