

# INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING IN KYRGYZSTAN

*Marina Sivashova, reporter, Kyrgyzstan*

**It is common for the media of Kyrgyzstan to publish stories blasting corruption and other misconduct involving top-ranking officials. To obtain this kind of information journalists sometimes undertake investigations.**

There is still no agreement over whether investigative reporting should be classed as a special genre. The classification of journalistic genres taught to Kyrgyz university students majoring in journalism does not include it. Richard E. Shafer, a professor at the University of North Dakota in the US, a participant in the Summer Journalism School organized under the aegis of the American University in Kyrgyzstan last August, insisted that investigative reporting (commonly referred to as journalist investigation in this country - *Author*) is simply a thorough reporting job. According to Prof. Shafer, there is no use in suggesting that there are special methods of story-writing pertaining to this genre. Russian theorist of journalism Aleksandr Tertychny admits that concepts of investigative reporting and investigations have become increasingly customary in journalist lexis during the past decade. Soviet (and hence Kyrgyz), journalism didn't use these terms as it was wholly engaged in promulgating the Soviet lifestyle.

## FACTS COUNT

Human rights topics, which in the view of most reporters I talked to, are fertile soil for investigative reporting, were helpful in consoli-

dating some Kyrgyz newspapers – Delo Nomer, Prestupleniye i Nakazakiye, Tribuna – that emerged during the first years after independence. However, journalists didn't give a great deal of thought to what their working method was to be called – what mattered was to get information that seemed to be in the air after many Soviet secrets were declassified. (It was much later that many officials realized that news was a commodity that could be sold to journalists for cash. What, after all, can you say to archive workers who ask for payment for files they have produced from their library - considering that theirs is a budget organization and, consequently, penniless? *Author*). It was much easier to get information in the early 1990s. Many papers in Kyrgyzstan were publishing stories about illegal privatization by some officials (or groups), of state property and human rights violations by law enforcement and judiciary authorities.

The human rights newspaper Delo Nomer was especially successful on this front. The newspaper's journalist Natalya Domogalskaya says: "There were cases where cooperation between a journalist and an attorney brought quite unexpected results. For example, after the newspaper published a story by our reporter

Vadim Nochovkin about a woman murdering her husband (for which she was sentenced to a long prison term), and publicized details ignored by the court, the judges reconsidered the earlier ruling and acquitted her of all the charges. There is no doubt that the newspaper achieved such fantastic results due to its journalists' skillful work getting the facts right in a difficult case. It's hard to say what there was more of in that report – good journalism or a job badly done first by police investigators and then by a judge.

As regards investigative reporting proper, I don't think there is such a special genre. Absolutely any story is the fruit of a reporter's investigation. If a reporter is working on a personality sketch he must be able to see into that person's heart, get him to talk, uncover in his character some features that are new to others. If it is about business problems a journalist needs to get an insight into the economic aspects of the issue. And lastly, if a journalist engages in criminal topics there is a broad field for investigation."

Meanwhile investigative reporting was a notion mentioned extremely rarely in the press of that time. Today, you can see it even on a paper's date-line. One of Kyrgyzstan's major Russian-language newspapers, Vecherny Bishkek, has a department of investigations. The department is run by Erlan Sadykbekov, an experienced re-

porter who has written a great many articles about top-secret businesses, outstanding personalities, ancient treasure-troves as well as military reports from Afghanistan. When asked about investigative reporting he said: "I find it rather difficult to give a clear-cut definition of investigative reporting. Hardly can it be termed a special genre. Media items may be written as features, stories, reports. What really matters is that they should have a common objective, which is to reveal a true picture and find a solution to a grave problem. Of course, it sometimes happens that journalists come by files that can serve as a basis for publications. Yet I believe investigation is where a journalist can, on his own, find answers to questions he has asked before starting work on a story."

A journalist from the private newspaper *Res Publica*, Yelena Listvennaya, says: "Investigative reporting is non-existent in Kyrgyzstan and cannot exist by definition. One may speak about studying a problem as a method of pre-publication work. A column called 'Wait for Me' in *Vecherny Bishkek* is a good example. Here the columnist's objective is to find the whereabouts of people who lost contact many years ago. I think that behind every 'rendez-vous' of people in the newspaper's publications there is a great deal of in-

vestigation by the columnist Viktoria Kureneva. As far as form is concerned, investigative reporting reminds me of a police investigation, and so I think this method of journalism is more suitable for reports focusing on judiciary or crime. In my opinion, while writing any kind of stories journalists employ exploration as their working method to get information.

Meanwhile, investigation is a long-protracted process and few will agree to take on the job because it is too time consuming and no one knows for sure what the outcome will be. In addition, few editors would expect a journalist to come up with a front-pager (especially if the journalist needed to be absent for several days). Stories that I see in our press – revelations and all – remind me primarily of promotional campaigns working for the image of companies or people. I find them a long way off being fair."

#### **UPHOLDING PRINCIPLES**

A Washington Post reporter, Sherry Ricchiardi, who taught journalism at the American University in Kyrgyzstan (AUK) in 2001, states that investigative reporting exists as a genre. She describes it as a genre that not only raises a subject of great social concern but also tracks links and persons involved in the matter in question. As a result, a journalist may

come up with a suggestion or statement based on proven facts and evidence.

What do journalism teachers proceed from in regards investigative reporting? Alan Kubatiyev, Candidate of Science (Philology), AUK's journalism teacher says: "There is no investigative reporting to speak of in Kyrgyzstan's journalism today. In the first place it is because the very genre of investigation pre-supposes absence of partiality. This kind of reporting requires specific skills and the ability to select, process and evaluate a great deal of information. One of the principal imperatives here is that every fact must be checked, as every fact is 'wrapped up' in opinions that have nothing to do with it.

This genre is regarded by the Kyrgyz press as unwanted today. In part, this is because the press cannot rise above partisanship - which is to say that every story coming out in a newspaper affiliated with one of the sides is partial. This country's mass media employ elements of investigative reporting that testify to their reporters' high skills whenever there is demand from power institutions, parties or individuals. Much to our regret there is no demand stemming from the journalist's duty: to do his job because he cannot help but do it. That is what our journalists lack."