

MASS MEDIA IN UZBEKISTAN

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Annotation: Mass media in Uzbekistan is concerned with the situation of Uzbek media. Although a government decree officially eliminated state censorship in 2002, it has continued to severely restrict independent journalism, particularly following the Andijon uprising of 2005. Licensing and regulation are the purview of the State Press Committee and the Inter-Agency Coordination Committee, which use their authority to harass and delay the activities of independent media outlets.

Key words: news, TV, information, activities

In late 2006, authorities further tightened state control by requiring re-registration by all media outlets not passing a summary review of qualifications. In 2005 some 30 to 40 independent television stations and seven independent radio stations were in operation, but four state-owned television stations, run by the Television and Radio Company of Uzbekistan, dominated the market. No live programming is allowed.

Total newspaper readership is estimated at only 50,000; the newspaper market is dominated by the state-owned papers Pravda Vostoka, Halq Sozi, and Narodnoye Slovo. The largest privately owned papers are Novosti Uzbekistana, Noviy Vek, Noviy Den, and Mohiyat. The state controls newspaper distribution and materials supply. In the early 2000s, newspaper articles occasionally have criticized government policy and social conditions, but bribery of journalists is common. The only national news agency, the Uzbekistan National News Agency, is state-controlled. Agence France-Presse, Anadolu Ajansı (of Turkey), the Associated Press, Interfax (of Russia), and Reuters are foreign agencies with offices in Uzbekistan. The government forced Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty to close its Tashkent office in late 2005. In early 2006, a new media law placed further restrictions on the activities of foreign news organizations in Uzbekistan.[1]

In 2011, the flow of information coming out of the country remains tightly controlled by the authorities but a few independent voices are still reporting from inside Uzbekistan. The Uznews.net news website has been operational since 2006 and is one of the few sources that still has a network of journalists on the ground reporting on day-to-day events in Uzbekistan.[2]

Journalism in Uzbekistan is a dangerous profession with a number of reporters imprisoned for simply doing their jobs. Uzbekistan is the leading jailer of journalists in the region. As of 2011 there were eleven journalists behind bars in Uzbekistan.[3] Television in Uzbekistan was first introduced in 1956 when Uzbek SSR was part of the Soviet Union. The first national television channel was O'zbekiston, which was introduced during beginning transmission of Uzbekistan. Colour television was also introduced in the 1970s. Back then, O'zbekiston was the only TV channel, and it broadcast several times a day. Uzbekistan's first private television channel STV, started broadcasting on 15 May 1991.

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Uzbekistan has one of Central Asia's biggest media markets. TV is the most popular medium and the state broadcaster operates the main national networks. Russian TV is widely watched.

Media freedom has declined after some limited improvement following the death in 2016 of former President Islam Karimov.

The run-up to the 2021 presidential election saw tightened controls over internet content and increased pressure on critical voices.

News is mainly consumed online, especially by younger Uzbeks, but sensitive content is often blocked. Opposition and other critical websites are based abroad.

Television

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Undigital

Uzbekistan's first and leading digital platform Uzdigital, launched in 2009. In 2013, high definition television in HD has been launched on a commercial basis. Uzdigital recently launched its own HD channels such as Zo'r TV HD, MY5 HD, Sevimli HD, Kinoteatr HD, Milliy HD, and UzHD. In September 2012 audiences had reached 1 million

A 2006 Human Rights Watch report summarised the media environment in Uzbekistan at the time saying that ‘the government continues its practice of controlling, intimidating, and arbitrarily suspending or interfering with the work of civil society groups, the media, human rights activists, and opposition political parties. In particular, repression against independent journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition members increased this year.’[1]

2005 should be considered a watershed moment because, after the Andijan Events in 2005, the media environment was cleansed of any remaining opposition. Foreign journalists were banned and websites were blocked. I entered the National University of Uzbekistan Faculty of Journalism in 2004 and was a witness to these events. ‘You cannot discuss the question of freedom of speech in this building’, as Dean of the Faculty Kudrat Irnazarov once said. A generation of journalists were raised in such an environment, and it is important to understand this context when examining the present day situation. Media landscape in Uzbekistan

Article by Nikita Makarenko

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Media landscape in Uzbekistan

Scorched earth: media in Uzbekistan between 2005 and 2016

Under the rule of President Islam Karimov (1991-2016), the media in Uzbekistan experienced significant pressure. The total domination of the media environment by censorship and threats to journalists meant there was no freedom of expression in the media at all. Only a few websites such as Uznews.net, Ferghana.ru, and Neweurasia.net were brave enough to publish critical stories, and their offices were abroad. None of these websites were registered in the country. But all of them were blocked and only a few people were able to read it using a VPN (virtual private network). It was extremely dangerous to write for these outlets and many journalists faced threats or had to emigrate outside of Uzbekistan to seek safety. Local TV, radio, and newspapers were sterile in terms of criticism during this time.

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Faculty Kudrat Irnazarov once said. A generation of journalists were raised in such an environment, and it is important to understand this context when examining the present day situation. A shift of the media landscape in Uzbekistan between 2016 and 2020

The new President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was elected in 2016 after the death of Karimov. Surprisingly for all he chose a course to let people speak more freely. It was not announced like 'now you could speak', but people started to write increasingly critical posts on Facebook or via Telegram messenger, and there were no repressions. Step by step, you were able to see critical posts in private online media outlets too. I stepped up in the process in May 2017. I was not sure that it was 'allowed' to write yet but was persuaded to by the Editor-in-Chief at Gazeta.uz to try.

My first critical story was published in May 2017 and it was well received.[2] People were calling me and saying: 'We can't believe it is online. Should be a new era'. We realised that it was a success and we had none of the 'consequences' as it could happen in Karimov times. No phone calls, no threats. That was the beginning, and from that point, I was constantly trying to publish more and more stories.

The following month, President Mirziyoyev for the first time confirmed his intention to develop freedom of speech and blamed the media for the lack of criticism saying "it is a pity that our media still don't reflect all problems which we have in our lives, yet we need to strengthen a spirit of criticism and self-criticism in our society." [3] From this time journalists and bloggers became an integral part of the so-called 'Uzbek Thaw'. Reforms were coming in thick and fast and people were demanding more and more information. As a result of the ongoing process of liberalisation, Uzbekistan jumped from 169th in the World Press Freedom Index in 2017 to 156th in 2020.[4] It was also excluded from the 'blacklist' of countries, deemed to have a 'very serious situation', and put on the 'red list' for countries with a 'difficult situation'.

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