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“The Path to Independence: A comparative analysis of the development of independent media in the early United States and the contemporary Republic of Georgia.”

by

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Introduction

In the decades since the fall of communism, the newly independent states of Eastern Europe are attempting to build democracy and stable governments. As the countries evolve from an era of state-controlled media and limited freedom of expression, there are many challenges to creating a valuable and respected system of media. In the Republic of Georgia, a new generation of journalists and media entrepreneurs marks a return to creative freedom. They face economic, governmental, and professional obstacles on their course toward establishing a new tradition of media. In this thesis, I examine the challenges and patterns of establishing a free and independent press in nations without a tradition of freedom of expression or information. With focus on Georgia, I will compare their development of media with the growth of the earliest media in the United States.

In the tradition of American media, the values of independence, fairness and truth have endured and established the U.S. at the pinnacle of journalistic professionalism. American media is considered the Fourth Estate, a valuable link in our system of democracy and public participation. I chose to use the press system of the U.S. for our basis of comparison because of this tradition. American media, however, has taken two centuries to earn the reputation of fairness and balance it enjoys today. In the early years of our republic, the few newspapers that survived financially were highly partisan and irresponsible with their charge to facilitate democracy and free expression. The fledgling newspapers of the time were not unlike the struggling, partisan press of modern-day Eastern Europe. Journalists had to overcome the financial and legal challenges to survive as a business or provide a service to the new democracy and its citizens.

For Georgia, a developing post-communist nation in the wake political revolution, a free and responsible press system may be the basic catalyst for citizen involvement, open debate and the development of democracy. Similar challenges of finances, law, professionalism and public trust are facing Georgian journalists today. In Georgia, a tradition of opinion-based reporting endures after the fall of communism; and a general lack of journalistic professionalism and training keeps newspapers from reaching its full investigative or analytical potential. On its way to establishing itself in the public's trust, the Georgian media is facing economic, ethical and political challenges. It is my goal to both outline some of these challenges and compare them to the experience of the American media on its road to professionalism and financial success.

It is the ultimate goal of this project to thoroughly describe and compare the media of both countries for the purpose of identifying similarities. It is my hypothesis that many parallels will exist and a clear picture of the most fundamental processes for developing independent media will arise. It's my hypothesis that the basic challenges to sustaining a system of free press are the same and that there exist similar patterns for overcoming them.

Literature Review

The early American press has been the subject of much research and writing. Dozens of books exist about the development of the media, descriptions of the early press and projections about its future based its early traditions. Material on media in the Republic of Georgia, however, is much more difficult to find. Though literature exists about media in both countries, there have been no studies or comparisons of the United States and the Republic of Georgia together. It is my goal to contribute to the body of knowledge about developing independent media by identifying similarities and patterns of development in the histories of these two systems.

For this study, I focused on literature about the functions of the early American media, its struggles and triumphs in maintaining independence and the traditions established by the earliest American journalists. Specific information about the writing style, ownership patterns and government involvement in media were also important to my broad understanding of the development of a free press. My studies of Georgia, however, were mostly confined to internet resources, local agency reports and personal interviews. The following is a general outline of my findings on media in each country.

The Early American Press

Because literature on American media throughout history is abundant, my reading and research is focused on the issues most important to our comparison. These authors contributed most to my knowledge about the economic, professional, legal and public challenges and responsibilities of the early American press.

To describe the economic state of media in colonial America, it was necessary to know who owned newspapers, how they were funded and, consequently, what type of influence ownership had on content. In *The Good Citizen: a History of American Civic Life*, Michael Schudson describes the role of early journalists in society. He claims that “colonial printers...were public figures – running the post office, serving as clerks for the government, and printing the laws. But they were equally small businessmen and there was at first little to indicate that the newspaper would become a central forum for political discourse.”¹

Similar to this description of the earliest American printers is Charles E. Clark’s in *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740*. According to Clark, early “journalists” were simply printers or in the words of Benjamin Franklin – “mere mechanicks.” As he details the difficulties of printing news, I learned more about the economic responsibilities and challenges of colonial publishers. He also discusses the minimal use of advertising, difficulties in circulation and political sponsorships and patronage.

Providing further ownership information, LSU professor Timothy E. Cook in his book *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution*, traces the history of political sponsorships and the partisan press. Cook also outlines a model of “the reporter as a key participant in decision making and policy making and of the news media as a central political force in government.”² This argument is part of my general consideration of “the public” and media’s role in society in general and democracies, in particular. Cook makes his argument based on research of the internal structures of news organizations, the role of public relations in the media and governmental censorship and subsidy of the news.

¹ Schudson, *The Good Citizen* (35)

² Cook, *Governing with the News* (3)

The Public was the most difficult descriptor to define and research for both countries. It includes information about public usage of the media, media's influence on public opinion and the broader relationship of media outlets and the public in democratic societies. To understand the way newspapers were first used in the United States, I turned to Richard D. Brown's *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America: 1700-1865*. In the book, Brown provides statistics on literacy rates in the earliest American colonies and the progression of literacy up to the Civil War. He also acknowledges the importance of the United States postal service in distributing newspapers. He attributes the extensive network of post offices in American to the ideology and "expansive publicly oriented policy" on the importance an informed public.

This idea of an informed citizenry is the main focus of Michael Schudson's *The Good Citizen*, discussed above. His writings about the complex relationship between politics, media and the public were interesting to my study of the overall development of media's role in the United States. Its role as political educator to citizens of this democracy inspired my consideration of "The Public" as a research descriptor.

Arthur M. Schlesinger also discusses the role of the colonial press in early American society, claiming that it contributed greatly to America's successful revolution. In his book *Prelude to Independence: The newspaper war on Britain 1764-1776*, Schlesinger claims that "in fostering a revolution in politics," the printers, "also fostered a revolution in journalism." They made newspaper reading an American habit, created a market for more papers, and established themselves as opinion makers." His conclusions were also important to my understanding of media usage and "the public" as a consumer and constituent of American newspapers.

Schlesinger's most controversial conclusion is that "next to independence, itself, the

Revolutionary generation's greatest legacy to the American people was the conviction that freedom of utterance ranks unique among human rights as the protector and promoter of all the others."³

This claim is controversial because, though it is often assumed that freedom of speech and of the media is fundamental to the United States' government, law and national ethic, there are critics who argue that the founding father's vision of media's role in democracy was much more limited. In *Legacy of Suppression: Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History*, Leonard Levy argues that our modern assumptions about the value of the press in early American society are overstated and indeed wrong. He claims that "the persistent image of colonial America as a society in which freedom of expression was cherished is a hallucination of sentiment that ignores history...the American people simply did not understand that freedom of thought and expression means equal freedom for the other fellow, especially the one with hated ideas."⁴ Levy's evidence, drawn mostly from the period 1776-1791 lead him to write "I have been reluctantly forced to conclude that the generation which adopted the Constitution and the Bill of Rights did not believe in a broad scope for freedom of expression, particularly in the realm of politics."⁵

Originally published in 1960, *Legacy of Suppression* was revised and extended in 1985. Levy's new argument in *Emergence of a Free Press* maintains that our forefathers and the American public did not believe in total press freedom. He does argue, however, that "freedom of the press also meant that the press had achieved a special status as an unofficial fourth branch of government, "the Fourth Estate," whose function was to check the three official branches by

³ Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence* (x)

⁴ Levy, *Legacy of Suppression* (18)

⁵ Levy, *Legacy of Suppression* (xxi)

exposing misdeeds and policies contrary to the public interest.”⁶ The press has also become an essential component of the system of popular government by dissemination important information to the electorate. Though the revolutionary generation still actively restrained the press with libel and sedition laws, the value of media to democracy was beginning to emerge.

In *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting*, Thomas Leonard argues that the early press “provided a vernacular – a common language in both words and pictures – for political interests to be expressed and shared.”⁷ In the book, Leonard traces the media’s coverage of politics from the American Revolution to the Progressive Era of the early 20th century. Though Leonard agrees with Levy’s argument that the founding fathers had little idea how important newspapers would become in the republic, he maintains that even the earliest politicians were using the news for political gain. This book is filled with examples of the media’s involvement in government and public affairs – an excellent determiner of its early development.

These findings formed the basis of my consideration of Media Law as a descriptor. Ultimately, I wanted a basic understanding of the media’s role in American’s society to which to compare the Georgian government and media relationship.

From its birth in the United States and earliest allowances of freedom over two centuries ago, the American press has developed a great deal. Specifically, the professional and ethical standards of American journalism have advanced to what many consider the pinnacle of “objective,” balanced and truthful reporting. But, it was not always this way. David T.Z. Mindich’s *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism* is a thorough analysis of the earliest press’s “professional standards.” Mindich discusses and defines

⁶ Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press* (xii)

⁷ Leonard, *The Power of the Press* (4)

the “history and structure of journalism’s most celebrated and least understood practice” – objectivity.⁸ To define objectivity, Mindich focuses on five of its basic tenets with examples from American media history – detachment, nonpartisanship, the inverted pyramid writing style, facticity and balance. He concludes that quality journalism is desperately important, but our traditional notions of objectivity, in terms of complete detachment, must be revised.

One of the few works that compares the media of the early United States and Republic of Georgia specifically is a speech by John Maxwell Hamilton, entitled “The Education of a Free Press in Post-Communist Eastern Europe.” In it, Hamilton compares the general systems of media in the Eastern Europe and Caucasus region and gives three “answers” to the problem of evolving the media to a higher level of social responsibility: 1) the rise of a stronger middle class and media ownership by nonpartisan, consumer based patrons, 2) governmental participation in discourse through media, rather than attempted control of its content and 3) (and most importantly) journalism training.⁹

This basic idea was a jump-start to my research of early American and contemporary Georgian media. I soon discovered, however, that no systematic or comprehensive comparison has been done on the two countries. Georgian media, especially, is a relatively unwritten story, which made my research difficult, but important. A study of the development of independent media systems in both countries can reveal important similarities and a broader pattern of development for media worldwide. These sources on American media, and the basic comparison by Dean Hamilton, formed the foundation on which I began my own study and discussion of Georgia and its burgeoning press system.

⁸ Mindich, *Just the Facts* (2)

⁹ Hamilton, speech transcript

The Georgian Press

For many reasons, my research of Georgian media was more challenging. Because Georgia's history as a democracy is still relatively young, many sources and media are in the native Georgian language and few studies have been done on media usage in the country, information on Georgia was more difficult to obtain.

The basis and beginning of my research was an internship at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in Washington, DC during the summer of 2004. ICFJ is "an independent, nonprofit journalism organization dedicated to improving the quality of journalism worldwide, especially in countries with little or no tradition of an independent press,"¹⁰ including the Republic of Georgia. In partnership with the Caucasus School for Journalism and Media Management and Caucasus Center for Journalism in Tbilisi, ICFJ has worked for years to establish professional and ethical excellence in Georgian journalism. ICFJ's belief that "vigorous, independent media are essential building blocks on which democracy, freedom and human rights must be based," is central to the foundation of my work on this thesis.

Through my work at ICFJ, I was able to meet and interview with Georgian journalists, media professionals, journalism school educators and ICFJ staff with expertise in the media of this region. In total, I conducted seven interviews - by email over the internet and in person during my stay at ICFJ. These interviews were especially important for the more elusive questions on public perception and media usage in the country. Their first-hand accounts of the national mood and public opinion were vital supplements to facts and figures about Georgia's press system.

Because of the relative newness of Georgia's press system, the internet was also important to my research. Organizations including the U.S. State Department, the BBC and

¹⁰ www.icfj.org/about.html

other international journalism agencies publish comprehensive yearly reports on the state of media in many countries, including Georgia. I also used studies and literature written about the general Caucasus or former Soviet region for background research and supplementary information.

In the beginning, when this study was a mere idea, I met and interviewed Marina Vashakmadze. Marina currently serves as the director of the Caucasus Center for Journalism in Tbilisi, Georgia and is writing the first modern journalism textbook in the Georgian language. Marina was a fascinating source with firsthand accounts of the Rose Revolution, Georgia's new political administration and the past and present state of media in the country. She spoke specifically about the financial struggles of independent media outlets in the country, especially since the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. She is optimistic, however, about the work that the Caucasus Center and new journalism schools are doing for the newest generation of journalists joining the work force with better, more ethical professional skills.

Also from the Tbilisi Caucasus Center, I was able to interview John Smock. Smock also cited financial difficulties as an obstacle to truly successful journalism in the country. He claimed that because of heavy reliance on wealthy benefactors for patronage, "newspapers are almost without any influence at all. The new Georgia is emerging as a TV news culture. None of the media outlets are profitable. They all limp along financially."

One of the few English-language publications I found that described media in the Caucasus or former Soviet-region was Peter Gross's *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe*. In the book, Gross discusses this broader interplay of political culture, civil society, media and democracy. He claims that, "In its most idealistic form,

media freedom means not only freedom from governmental involvement but also a significant distancing both from political influence and partisanship and from exclusionary commercial goals.”¹¹

An article “Free to Go Bust,” in *Transitions Online* magazine gave great support to the theme of media’s economic struggles I had discovered in my interviews. “Many journalists working throughout the former Soviet Union will tell you that true independence only comes with financial stability. Government repression, official and unofficial censorship, a biased judiciary – for sure, all prevent the development of free press. But equally damaging are more mundane impediments: inefficient, government controlled printing and distribution facilities, telecommunications monopolies, and a dire lack of qualified media managers.”¹² I would find throughout my research, the reoccurring theme of financial stability and independence, and this 2003 article focusing on internet journalism was substantial evidence.

In our interview, John Smock also commented on the professional style and public expectations of Georgian journalists. His insights were important in defining my Professionalism descriptor for Georgian media. According to Smock, ideas like balanced, fact-based reporting, challenging government sources are relatively new concepts for Georgian journalists and its public audiences.

In a similar email-interview, Dave Bloss a former Knight Fellow in Georgia and member of the Georgia J-school faculty, spoke of the difficulties Georgian journalists have with objectivity and “finding the middle ground between pro-government and opposition reporting.” These ethical struggles however are not often considered by the public, he claims. Self-censorship is a stronger cause for public cynicism.

¹¹ Gross, *Entangled Evolutions* (4)

¹² Robertson, “Free to Go Bust,” *Transitions Online*

George Sulkhansihvili, a Georgian graduate student in LSU'sanship School of Mass Communication completed a thesis on the media's effect on public opinion and governmental changes. His study used content analysis of the four most highly circulated Georgian newspapers during a period in 2001. He also acknowledges the great lack of research and information on Georgian media, its usage and effects. Sulkhansihvili's case study found that during this time period leading up to public protest and government resignations, the media were decidedly slanted to the opposition, rejecting government pressures to cover the events in their favor. He concludes that "the behavior of Georgian newspapers may be characterized as a fight for freedom *from*, but barely demonstrate an understanding of freedom *for*," therefore failing in their primary function to facilitate fair discourse in society.¹³ I heard this theme of balance in reporting and the fear of government influence in many of my interviews and readings, especially concerning the Rose Revolution.

I was able to interview another Georgian graduate student, Baadur Koplatadze, about his thesis on media framing of Georgia's 2003 parliamentary elections and the subsequent Rose Revolution. His study focused on the government responsibility frame of media and found that the Georgian press "laid the groundwork" for President Shevardnadze's resignation with their coverage of the elections and administration. Baadur agreed that media in Georgia is still very young and though some managers and editors from the "old" system remain, most journalists are younger students. Education, therefore and establishment of solid professional and ethical standards among this new journalistic generation are most important for the future of journalism in Georgia.

While at ICFJ in June and July of 2004, I interviewed several journalists and educators on staff with experience and knowledge about Georgian media including Vjollca Shtylla, a Program

¹³ Sulkhansihvili, Thesis (38)

Director for Eastern Europe and Nikki Kazimova, a Program Officer for Azerbaijani and Eurasia programs. Ann Olsen, a former Knight Fellow with ICFJ, was serving as a Program Director for the organization until August 2003. Ann gave me a great model for understanding the difference in journalism in communism and democracy and spoke of these challenges defined in the Professionalism and Government descriptors.

For background information on the history of Georgia its media system, news articles, internet sources and the theses of two Georgian LSU students were of great use. A first hand account by Tina Tsomaia, an adjunct professor at the J-school, in a 2004 issue *Foreign Policy* magazine was especially applicable. From the perspective of a young, Georgian journalist and media professor, the revolution and the media's influence came to life. Tsomaia cites studies by the Caucasus institute for Peace, the U.S.-Caucasus Institute for Strategic and Cultural Studies and a *Caucasus Context* special issue on the revolution in the article.

The specific internet sources that were of use to me were ICFJ's International Journalists Network (IJNET) where I accessed media-related excerpts of *The Constitution of Georgia* and a code of ethics by the Independent Association of Georgian Journalists. Also, the International Press Institute and Reporters Without Borders issue a yearly World Press Freedom Review and Annual Report on struggling countries' media status. The Committee to Protect Journalists publishes a similar report on Attacks on the Press for country's with a history of journalistic persecution and violence, including Georgia. The U.S. State Department, also, in partnership with various nonprofits in Georgia in the Caucasus region publish reports on press freedom and human rights practices.

Though less traditional, these sources on the state of media in the Republic of Georgia were enlightening and proved fundamental to my analysis and discussion of independent media

in Georgia and the United States. The interviews, especially, gave a unique, personal perspective to the study that I value in this final product. I hope that this compilation of information on Georgia and our comparison to the United States is valuable to future media scholars and practitioners in both countries.

Methodology

In order to compare the systems of media in the Republic of Georgia and the United States, this thesis will first describe the system of newspapers in the early history of the United States. I have chosen a set of basic descriptors, or major points of comparison, around which to focus the description and comparison. These descriptors include questions and research on the subjects: economics, media law, professionalism and “the public.”

Broadly, this “economic” descriptors outline the financial viability and success of the press as a business. “Media law” includes government restrictions on and assistant to early journalists. “Professionalism” refers to the extent that early media practitioners respected the journalistic values of objectivity, ethics and training in their craft. “The public” is a much broader, yet equally important, consideration of the media’s reputation and responsibility to its audience, its consumers and the country’s citizens. This descriptor will also attempt to define how media is used by the citizens of the U.S. and Georgia and the media’s larger role in society, the marketplace and democracy.

The descriptors were chosen based on readings, discussed in my literature review, and research on early U.S. newspapers and media. They were chosen in order to narrow our field of study for this project and limit the wide scope of comparison to relevant and significant points of interest. My findings will both sketch an outline of early American media and frame my research on Georgia’s emerging system. The results of research on both countries will be compared and analyzed, hopefully lead to conclusions about their relative similarity or differences in process and success.

There are, certainly, major and evident differences between the development processes of these two countries including discrepancies in technology, political history and cultural values.

Our intention, however, is to compare the more basic processes of developing and sustaining a financially, politically and ideologically independent press system for the benefit of a democratic population. I believe, however, that certain issues of economics, media professionalism, law and public perception are significant regardless of disparities in time, technology or culture. It is on these most fundamental issues, we have based the “descriptors” and our research.

American Media Descriptors

Economics -

Media in Georgia and the early United States are firstly a product to be sold and bought, a business with consumers and investors to satisfy. The economic and financial concerns of media have a direct effect on journalistic content, tone and style. The earliest printers and media practitioners were businessmen, and the survival of the news was dependent on the success of their businesses. Independence in content is, consequently, dependent on financial independence and economic viability. The financial contracts of newspapers in the early republic resulted in strong ties of political and commercial loyalty and bias in their content. The following economic considerations affected the early independence of media in the U.S.

1. Many newspapers were tied to political parties or funded by private citizens with vested political interests.

The success of most newspapers depended on the support of a wealthy patron, or, most often, affiliation with a political party. The funding parties, however, were hardly responsible and fair, using the media as mouthpieces for propaganda, gossip and electioneering – much like the media was used by Soviet government in countries like Georgia. “Newspapers in the colonial

and revolutionary eras were supported by political patronage, factional disputes, and the participation of politicians in the assembly of the newspaper.”¹⁴ Even many “independently-owned” papers were often controlled by citizens with vested interest in political parties or business and used the papers to advance their personal cause.

Specifically in the age of Federalists vs. Jeffersonians, patronage, subsidies and outright establishment of political newspapers was widespread in government. Newspapers were simply another forum for political competition and vote getting. “Any wall between journalistic and political enterprises was gone; editors were party leaders, served on party central committees and gave speeches on behalf of federal and party slates.”¹⁵

Some may argue that American journalism today is falling back into partisan reporting and are not much more responsible than these earliest newspapers. The difference, however, is in professionalism. The printers of early America were simply that – printers. Today, journalists strive, at least in theory, for independence, non-partisanship and balance.

2. Newspapers’ limited finances resulted in limited circulation and influence in colonial communities.

Not until the invention of the penny press, a newspaper affordable for the middle-class citizen, did journalism become a generally profitable business venture, or a forum for public discourse. According to Gerald Baldasty in *Commercialization of the News*, small circulation, partisan press was replaced in the 19th century commercialized news shaped to be sold as a commodity. “Technological innovation, the rise of a market economy, the broad sweep of industrialization, greater leisure time and literacy, the rise of great cities...helped reshape the

¹⁴ Cook, *Governing with the News* (25)

¹⁵ Cook, *Governing with the News* (29)

American newspaper.”¹⁶ This commercialization of the news was a change affecting all areas of the journalistic business, including finances, understanding of the roles of the press and day to day operations. Most important, however, was its effect on finances. With the change of patronage from political parties to advertisers, the content and audiences of the news shifted. These two constituencies of the news, “helped shape news to reflect their own needs and interests” and professionalism and public perception of the media began to change as well.¹⁷

3. Early American newspapers, not yet funded by advertising revenue or circulation, struggled financially, few surviving any significant amount of time.

For most, printing the news was a side job – far from the noble picture of vibrant and active reporting we have created today. “Colonial printers...were public figures – running the post office, serving as clerks for the government and printing the laws. But they were equally small businessmen and there was at first little to indicate that the newspaper would become a central forum for political discourse.”¹⁸

Limited finances equaled limited influence and public value in early American society. “Clearly printers did not imagine their newspapers to be either political instruments, or professional news gatherers. None of the early papers took an action to gather the news. They printed what came to them.”¹⁹ With this philosophy, journalism was not considered a highly valuable part of government or public life. Most areas of the country, outside major cities, did not even have a local paper. It would take a major shift in economic philosophy and professional standards to establish the American press as the valuable Fourth Estate.

¹⁶ Baldasty, *Commercialization of the News* (4)

¹⁷ Baldasty (5)

¹⁸ Schudson, *The Good Citizen*

¹⁹ Schudson, *The Good Citizen*

Professionalism -

Today, media in the United States is considered the height of journalistic liberty, objectivity and professionalism. Whether or not the daily media reach these lofty descriptions, it is impressed into our American sentiment that media is a valuable force in government, culture and democratic society. The measurement of “professionalism” is tricky because the highest principles of “professional” journalism are very seldom met, even today. The most professional journalists, however, are striving for them. Today, journalism is a profession of honor, distinction and even fame with journalists advancing tremendously in professional standards, ethical guidelines and public accountability. This however was not always the case. The early journalism in the United States was characterized by the following:

1. Journalism was not originally considered a profession of great distinction or even value.

Journalism in the early republic had not developed into a respected profession or art form of its own, requiring no training or special knowledge from its creators. The “journalists” of the time were untrained writers, printers mostly, who simply printed the news that came to them, often from other news sources in Europe. “Few of the people who brought out the first newspapers were journalists. They were mostly artisans with no special training in collecting information...The talent, leisure and vanity of the first editors were not great enough to tempt them to fill their papers with their own writing. They were citizens waiting for news to be brought by others. Failing to receive such gifts, the first journalists simply reprinted what they already found published in European papers.”²⁰

With increased circulation and professional accountability, the public found a voice for its bestowed “free expression” and the government found its public watchdog and Fourth Estate.

²⁰ Leonard, *Power of the Press* (14)

2. Objectivity - Most stories were highly opinionated and of poor quality.

The birth of objectivity as a core value in American journalism paralleled the growth of the penny press, advertising sales and middle-class circulation. The financial obligations of early newspapers to political parties and patrons resulted in content that ranged from slanted to downright disruptive. But when business, and no longer politicians, had vested interest in the content of news, media professionals realized the financial benefit of objectivity and balance in their news. Fairness to all patrons and factual reporting for all readers became the tenets of professional journalism, benefiting the marketplace and journalistic profession alike.²¹

A financial dependence on public business and government printing contracts prevented early journalists from writing or publishing truly objective pieces. “Such jobs [postmasterships, printing contracts from governors and assemblies, appointments as clerks or secretaries]...provided more stable cash flow than was received from subscriptions and they also provided entrée into political circles to parlay into more news and more profit.”²²

3. There were no schools, codes of ethics or professional societies for journalists.

Journalistic “quality” was poor.

Struggling to find its place and value in society, journalism began with far from honorable standards of writing and reporting. Undefined and unorganized as a profession, journalistic values were yet to be established through codes of ethics or professional societies

“The early press is best defined by the political information it did not offer and the questions it had not yet learned to ask.”²³ For the earliest journalists, “the way to investigate a native, elected, governing class was not clear. As might be expected in a press with thin tradition

²¹ Mindich, *Just the Facts*

²² Cook, *Governing with the News* (23)

²³ Leonard *The Power of the Press* (57)

of respect for controversy, shock tactics were soon tried.”²⁴ This growing tendency of sensationalism and disruptive reporting lead the government to increase restriction and even censorship.

Again, this outline of professionalism and education in journalism is hard to define. Even today the most “professional” media outlets can be sensational, controversy-loving and dishonorable. But, despite these lapses in professional judgment, media as a whole has advanced tremendously and lessons can be learned from these media pioneers.

Media Law and the Government -

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees the basic freedoms of expression and of the press that our nation’s journalists have enjoyed. Many questions, however, surround the original intentions of the amendment and the projected role of media in the United States. Throughout American history, also, have been many occasions of governmental restrictions and discouragement of vibrant, independent media including the Alien and Sedition Acts. Beginning with the Stamp Act and rebellion against the resident government of Great Britain, American media has had a tradition of investigative, often dissenting, coverage of government and its officials, establishing the press as the Fourth Estate. Despite instances of attempted restriction, the U.S. government as a whole throughout history has encouraged the independence of media. Still, these limitations exist:

1. The founding fathers’ original intentions for First Amendment freedoms might not have been as far-reaching as we now believe.

²⁴ Leonard, *The Power of the Press* (57)

In *Legacy of Suppression*, Leonard Levy claims that “the generation which adopted the Constitution and the Bill of Rights did not believe in a broad scope for freedom of expression, particularly in the realm of politics...When the founding fathers referred to freedom of speech, they were more likely to mean the freedom of legislatures to deliberate than freedom of citizens to speak their minds.”²⁵ These founding fathers, denied the press access to the very framing of these laws at the Constitutional Conventions. Levy even goes so far as to claim that, “the persistent image of colonial America as a society in which freedom of expression was cherished is an hallucination of sentiment that ignores history...the American people simply did not understand that freedom of thought and expression means equal freedom for the other fellow, especially the one with hated ideas.”²⁶ My predictions about the state of media in Georgia sounded very much like Levy’s description of the United States. I will later argue, in fact, that the citizens of Georgia may have a *better* understanding of the value of free expression than even the fabled fathers of the First Amendment.

2. Legal restrictions on freedom of the press existed despite the liberties guaranteed in the First Amendment.

Throughout American history, the freedom of the press and expression for the public has expanded and contracted. In times of national crises and fear, our government has taken restricted these liberties in the name of safety, patriotism and loyalty. For the earliest journalists, “legal action policed newspapers’ criticism initially by arrests for seditious libel and for violating

²⁵ Schuldson, *The Good Citizen*

²⁶ Levy, *Legacy of Suppression* (18)

parliamentary privilege; as these wanted they were replaced by attempts to deny access to governmental processes to offending reporters.”²⁷

At the end of the 18th century, and under threat of war from France, the U.S. Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts which made it a crime to publish “any false, scandalous, and malicious writing or writings against the Government of the United States.” During the summer of the 1798, 25 men, mostly editors of Republican newspapers were arrested and forced to close their papers under the new law. Included in this group was Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin and editor of the *Philadelphia Democrat-Republican Aurora*, charged with libel against President John Adams. These 25 and all those prosecuted under the act were subsequently pardoned by President Thomas Jefferson in 1800.²⁸

“If the first hundred years of American newspapers saw government’s punitive authority against newspapers wane somewhat, the press was far from independent: their ability to criticize government depended on powerful factions to provide copy, support and political cover.”²⁹ Compared to the restrictions on media today in countries without democratic traditions, these restrictions seem trivial. They are, however, important because their existence affected the formative years of our growing media; and their repercussions shape the traditions of today.

The Public and the ideal of the “informed citizenry”

Central to our arguments of media economics, professionalism and law is the consent and support of the American people, as constituents of the government, players in the marketplace and consumers of the news. The public is, in fact, both the audience and customer of the news business. Ideally, they are also the democratic public seeking to be informed by the media

²⁷ Cook, *Governing with the News* (20)

²⁸ www.earlyamerica.com; Folwell, “The Laws of the United States of America”

²⁹ Cook, *Governing with the News* (20)

coverage of government and issues of public interest. Therefore, measurements of public perception of media are important when considering the function and success of the media system as a whole. Without the respect and faith of the citizenry, the press cannot perform its functions of government watchdog, news bulletin or public forum.

One way to measure media usage is literacy rates in the early republic. According to Richard Brown in *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America*, “while there were regional differences...it appears that over half of the white male population was literate...and by the early 19th century, the difference between male and female literacy rates became negligible.”³⁰

Also, government subsidy of the news with low postal rates allowed newspapers to reach more and more communities outside of the cities. “In the new republic, ideology and politically exigency dictated an expansive publicly oriented policy for the dissemination of information...Starting with a network of seventy-five post offices in 1790, the United States post office came to comprehend some 28,000 offices in 1860...as a result, ordinary people used the mails routinely, especially for newspaper subscriptions and to reship their old papers to friends and relatives.”³¹

As newspapers could physically reach more people, they became more popular as a form of entertainment, political discussion and information. In 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that “‘the only aristocracy in this country is – the editors of newspapers,’ a disparate, non-college educated breed of self-made men whose information judgments were dictated by political and pecuniary advantage.”³²

³⁰ Brown, *Knowledge is Power* (12)

³¹ Brown, *Knowledge is Power* (12)

³² Brown, *Knowledge is Power* (277)

Georgian Methodology – Research Questions and Focus

Now, after tracing a basic pattern of development for independent media in the early United States, we will use our findings to frame our study of contemporary Georgian media. For each category of descriptor – Economics, Professionalism, Media Law and The Public – I used my findings about early American media to develop questions and a focused study of the Georgian press. My study of Georgia was rather limited because current literature on media in the country is scarce. But, through interviews, internet resources and some writings on the region, we describe the pattern of development of Georgian media and compare it to the early American press. Based on my hypothesis that a similar pattern of development would arise, we will examine Georgia in the Findings section, specifically, based on the above American descriptors. Below are our basic research questions and focus for research of Georgia:

Economics

With research of American media, we established the importance of economic independence to independence and balance in journalistic content; and we've seen how financial issues of ownership, patronage and advertising affected the media of the U.S. We begin our analysis of Georgia, therefore, with a consideration of the Georgian media's economic viability - the overall economic state of Georgia and the roles its media play in the marketplace. Research questions and considerations included:

- the financial viability of sustaining a newspaper or television station in the Georgia
- the sources of funding for average media outlets, the reach and pervasiveness of media to the entire country
- the effect of ownership and funding on content and loyalties
- the actual number of active newspapers in Tbilisi and the whole of the Republic
- the role of the media in the marketplace through advertising and public relations

Professionalism

Compared to the traditional sensibility in the United States, in Georgia, the concept of a “free and independent media” is new and only just emerging in the mind of average citizens. The memory of state-controlled media and wide-spread distrust in government and all institutions, including the press, associated with it is still fresh in the public mind. The task of local journalism schools, early professional societies and training programs is great - to train a new generation of journalists to fill the role of independent press in the country’s new democracy. Many factors contribute to a valid description of “professionalism,” some of which are subjective questions of style and tradition. While it is interesting and important to consider the editorial and news style of Georgian journalists, we are mostly interested in the level of education, professional support and ethical guidelines that exist in the countries for average journalists and media practitioners. Issues that we researched include:

- the focus on objectivity or editorial opinion
- the existence of professional societies, codes of ethics; average education and experience of journalists
- the journalistic style of Georgian reporters
- universities and training institutions in the country
- ethics – codes and more general expectations and norms

Media Law and the Government

Though the United States is a young country compared to the Republic of Georgia, Georgia has only emerged from a strict Soviet-Communist system of government within the last 20 years; and even more recently experienced the Rose Revolution, overthrowing the last remnants of the old regime for a younger, more democratic leadership and philosophy of government. Because of its turbulent recent history and deep-seated influences of communism, many laws found in print and believed in theory are not followed in practice. To accurately

describe the government's current influence on Georgian media, we question both paper and practice, law and incident. My research included the topics of:

- constitutional protection of freedom of speech and the media
- actual government actions
- attacks on freedom of the press, harm done to journalists
- more generally, how the new administration views media and its purpose
- how the new administration has treated the media following in the Rose Revolution

The Public

For Georgia, "the public" is a more complicated, but equally important consideration of the Georgian citizens' perception and use of the media. For the reasons discussed above, and unique questions of public trust in the media following communist government control, it is important to consider the public's opinion of media and its role in society. This data is much harder to collect and came mostly from interviews and projections made from statistical data about the population's media use. I hope to answer the following questions, among others:

- is media considered ethical or reliable of its coverage of most issues
- do most people read newspapers or watch television news
- the role media plays in Georgia's growing democracy
- perceptions about the media, changed since the Rose Revolution, considering the role played in the overturn of government and the new administration's use of media

Findings - Georgia

With methodology, literature and basic description of the early American press established, we can outline the basic comparison of media in modern-day Georgian and the early United States. It is important, before analyzing the media of Georgia, to understand something about its history as a nation. Even in historical background, some parallels can be found between Georgia and the United States. The differences in leadership, national ethic and culture, however, can help explain the most fundamental differences in media.

The first known states of Georgia, a country at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, were united in the 11th century by King David IV “The Builder.” After centuries of occupation by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks and Russians, Georgia became a part of the Russian Empire in 1801. Georgia enjoyed a brief period of independence from 1917-1921 before becoming part of the new Soviet Union. Following the collapse of communism in the USSR in 1991, Georgians gained independence once again and elected nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia as president. Gamsakhurdia was soon overthrown, however, by opposition militia in 1992 who installed former Soviet Former Minister Eduard Shevardnadze into office.

President Shevardnadze, dubbed the “fox of the Caucasus,” maintained a tolerant, but corruption-filled government throughout his 11-year term. Shevardnadze was supported by many early in his term, encouraging both young radicals and old communist bureaucrats to participate in the new democracy, and trying to maintain balance between the two opposing forces. In the late 1990s, however, the administration’s young reformers, disenchanted with the future of the nation under Shevardnadze, began resigning their posts and forming non-governmental organizations opposing the administration. The people of Georgia, too, and media in particular, were beginning to feel oppressed by Shevardnadze and his regime.

In April 2000, Georgian voters went to the polls and overwhelmingly re-elected President Shevardnadze for a second term, causing widespread speculation of election fraud and examination of Shevardnadze's power over government officials and the media. According to the European Institute of the Media, the incumbent received two-thirds of all available broadcast and newspaper coverage during the campaign, and the public was unable to "receive a full, fair and balanced accounting of the choices available to them."³³ In November 2003, the public, who had become increasingly disillusioned with Shevardnadze's corrupt administration, returned to the polls for parliamentary elections.

When election results again proved fraudulent, opposition groups lead by National Movement party called the country to action. Opposition parties refused to recognize the fabricated election results and huge demonstrations began to demand President Shevardnadze's resignation. Culminating in the nation's capitol Tbilisi, Georgian protestors achieved a peaceful revolution of government, bringing on the official resignation of Shevardnadze on the 23rd and a new government headed by National Movement leader, and future President, Mikhail Saakashvili. Their political uprising would come to be known as the "Rose Revolution" by the red rose Saakashvili carried into the Parliament building and the crowd's peaceful success at affecting democratic change.

Georgia's new administration, headed by President Saakashvili, includes many members of former opposition parties and currently maintains widespread public approval. Because of the peaceful Revolution of Roses, international governments and media look to Georgia to set the precedent for other post-Soviet nations struggles in human rights, government accountability and media independence. Georgia is an important nation in terms of potential influence and the

³³ 2000 World Press Freedom Review

democratic experiment, and therefore a worthy case study for comparison for students and politicians alike.

We will follow the basic outline of descriptors we established in our analysis of early American media – Economics, Professionalism, Media Law and The Public. In comparing, the fundamental patterns and variations of developing media emerge.

Economics

1. Many of Georgia's media outlets are owned by the state and politically invested organizations and individuals.

According to reports by international media agencies and non-profit organizations, “much of the Georgian media are considered to be free, and journalists regularly criticize officials and their government.” The Georgian government, however, currently owns a national newspaper *Sakartelos Respublika*, Georgian State TV station, Georgian State Radio and the news agency Sakinform; and the philosophy of media as a political mouthpiece remains from the Soviet and Shevardnadze regimes.

There are officially more than 100 registered independent newspapers, magazines and TV stations in Georgia who manage to operate regularly.³⁴ According to the BBC News' country report on media in Georgia, the major privately owned newspapers include:

- *Alia* (Repatriation,)
- *Rezonansi* (Resonance, daily)
- *Georgian Times* (English-language)
- *Svobodnaya Gruzia* (Free Georgia, Russian-language)
- 24 Saati (daily, English-language)
- *Akhali Versia* (weekly) and
- *Svobodnaya Gruzia* (Russian-language).

³⁴ Koplatadze, thesis (5)

Some of these papers, however, are what's known as "shadow" organizations with owners and patrons connected to government or political parties. Many are also in partnerships with radio and television stations. The private radio stations are Rustavi-2 and Imedi TV based in Tbilisi (both also own a newspaper component) and Ajara TV based in the province Batumi, Ajaria. The two major radio stations are Fortuna and Radio 105, both Tbilisi-based. The three major news agencies are Prime-News, Iprinda and Kavkasia Press.³⁵

Like in the early United States, newspapers and other media outlets come and go, unable to survive financially or acquire national circulation. Ownership changes and real stability and consequently, credibility with the public, is hard to maintain. Georgia has not yet reached a period of industrialization or commercialization like the U.S. in the late 19th century when the "penny press" and increased advertising revenue made media a profitable business venture. It will take time, as it did the United States, for media managers to emerge and successfully finance news agencies, television and radio stations and newspapers.

2. The general economic state of the country makes independently sustaining a newspaper extremely difficult.

With national independence came the loss of cheap Soviet energy and important trade relationships, making Georgia one of the poorest countries of the former USSR. During President Shevardnadze's term, especially, the country was in a period of poverty, corruption and crime. These unstable national conditions are less than ideal for a vibrant economy able to sustain vibrant media entrepreneurship. This situation is similar to the early American printer's predicament, but much worse. Though the American economy and marketplace were weak and it took many years for media to survive as a business. The Georgian economy is relatively more

³⁵ BBC News country profiles

depressed and media, therefore, will have a more difficult time breaking from the ownership constraints of wealthy, politically-vested patrons and relying solely on advertising or circulation.

Though independent media ownership is “allowed,” it may still be very difficult for individuals and organizations to achieve. “Many journalists working throughout the former Soviet Union will tell you that true independence only comes with financial stability.

Government repression, official and unofficial censorship, a biased judiciary--for sure, all prevent the development of a free press. But equally damaging are more mundane impediments: inefficient, government-controlled printing and distribution facilities, telecommunications monopolies, and a dire lack of qualified media managers.”³⁶

Georgia’s weak economic state prohibits the mutually beneficial relationship between media and business that American media enjoys today. Newspapers, especially, are often affiliated with political parties and groups because they lack advertising revenue and rely on circulation earnings for survival. Nationally, television is the preferred medium for most Georgian citizens because it’s relatively less expensive.

John Smock of Tbilisi’s Caucasus Center for Journalism agreed that the Georgian media struggles with issues “as much practical as ideological...it’s often the nuts-and-bolts management, skills, reporting skills, equipment, finances, etc. that they struggle with as much as the larger objectivity and independence issues.”³⁷ The general economic state of a country and traditions of business and ownership have great effect on the success of media as an industry, and therefore in its content as well.

³⁶ Marisa Robertson “Free to Go Bust,” *Transitions Online*

³⁷ John Smock, personal interview (September 2004)

Professionalism

1. Georgia has a strong history and tradition of journalism, but in a very different style than American writing and reporting.

Before its adoption into the Soviet Union, the state of Georgia boasted a tradition of independent media and even during the reign of communism, some underground publications thrived. This tradition was, however, more artistic and literature-based, than the American traditions of investigative reporting and dry, fact-based accounts, much like the modern-day European style of journalism. In Georgia, more opinionated reporting is preferred to the traditionally Western news values like objectivity and balance. After decades of blatant partisanship and stories reliant on conjecture in the absence of fact from powerful sources, Georgian media professionals and the public have come to prefer its style.

This tradition of blatantly partisan and opinionated writing is one that the early American press shared. Early printers of news in the United States were often disruptive, inciting and downright slanderous. The modern Georgian press may in fact be superior to the earliest American journalists in education, professional standards and public accountability.

One major and obvious difference in the countries, however, is the tradition of communism. Georgian media is only just emerging from a near century of serving as the mouthpiece of an oppressive government regime. The “official” message was often the only one reported, and this is what the Georgian public, the media’s audience, is accustomed to. According to Tbilisi J-School faculty member Dave Bloss, the public often does not know “what to do with an objective story,” having been so conditioned to reports wholly “pro-government” or “pro-opposition.” Especially now, post-Rose Revolution, media are tempted to support opposition parties (or the new party in control) because the majority of the country does and

positive change appears to be on the horizon. John Smock, a colleague of Bloss, described the Georgian media as “adolescent,” struggling with issues “as much practical as ideological...it’s often the nuts-and-bolts management, skills, reporting skills, equipment, finances, etc. that they struggle with as much as the larger objectivity and independence issues.”

Ann Olsen, a program director for ICFJ familiar with the style of journalism in Georgia and the Caucasus region gave me a great model for understanding the difference between reporting and writing under communism and democracy. Olsen explained that the difference in media styles from communism to democracy is the difference in monologue and dialogue, or telling and sharing news with the public. Under communism and in the “monologue” model, media were closely related to “the Power” – the Party, the government, even influential benefactors – and the information or news provided by this media is little more than propaganda from the top. In the “dialogue” or democracy model, the goal of media is to serve as a conduit for exchange between the “Power” and the people.

The current generation - more educated and organized into professional societies than any before - may shift this trend to more traditional values of balance and nonpartisanship. To be sure, the Georgian flair for literature in journalism will remain. Objective reporting on sides, balanced writing and non-partisan ownership fosters two-way communication. Since many current journalists also worked under the former communist government and the public at large remembers its powers, Georgia struggles to overcome the old model and establish a new in its new democracy.

2. Professional societies and codes of ethics for journalists do exist and journalism schools are growing in size and influence.

In 2001, the Independent Association of Georgian Journalists adopted the national *Code of Journalistic Ethics*. Its preamble states its purpose: “The Constitution of Georgia provides the guarantee of Freedom of Speech, including freedom of expression, the distribution of opinions and the obtaining and publishing of information. Journalism is the main tool for realizing these rights. Anyone representing the media should be aware of their responsibilities to society and secure their right as part of society – to discover information and learn the truth.”³⁸ The code outlines ethical standards for truth, objectivity, honesty, confidentiality and independence.

Journalism schools in Georgia are also working to establish these tenets of professional journalism and train a new generation of media professionals in the business and craft of the press. In Tbilisi, the Caucasus School for Journalism and Media Management and journalism agencies throughout the country, with support from international organizations, daily strengthen the reputation and professionalism of Georgian media. Journalism educators, however, struggle like the rest of the country to shift away from the old Marxist teaching model to a more democratic explanation and education in media’s role in society.

Georgian media professionalism are in these respects superior to its early American counterpart, because no ethical codes, professional societies or journalism schools existed in the U.S. until the 20th century.

Media Law and the Government

1. The Georgian Constitution provides for “freedom of speech,” but media law in general (libel laws, etc.) is designed to protect the government.

For Georgia, the establishment of media law in the national constitution was a major shift in government philosophy and practice from its communist history. With explicit freedoms for

³⁸ Independent Association of Georgian Journalists – *Code of Journalistic Ethics*

the media, the country broke from the traditions of state-owned media and propagandized messages – at least on paper. It's important, in our look at American and Georgian media, to consider not only law, but both governments' actual actions in regulating media.

On March 24, 1995,

The people of Georgia whose strong will is to establish a democratic social order, economic independence, a social and legal state, to guarantee universally recognized human rights and freedoms, to strengthen the state independence and peaceful relations with other countries announce to the world this Constitution based upon many centuries of state tradition and the main principles of the 1921 Constitution.³⁹

Article 19 of the new constitution outlines the rights of each individual to “freedom of speech though, conscience, religion and belief,” prohibiting the persecution of an individual for his thoughts or beliefs unless their expression infringes your own rights. More explicitly, Article 24 guarantees that “every individual has the right to freely receive and disseminate information” (Clause 1) and “The mass media is free. Censorship is prohibited” (Clause 2).

These provisions seem extremely broad and somewhat vague, but the fourth clause in Article 24 is much more explicit. It states “Clauses 1 and 2 can be restricted by law when conditions make it necessary to do so in order to guarantee and by the conditions necessary in a democratic society for the guarantee of state and public security, territorial integrity, prevention of crime, and the defense of rights and dignities of others, to avoid the revelation of confidentially received information or to guarantee the independence and impartiality of justice in a democratic society.”

These provisions for media freedom are fairly basic, but in fact, are even more explicit than American freedoms derived from the First Amendment. The American value of freedom of expression is fundamental to its Constitution, but also developed over time and through judicial process. Georgia, however, must specifically lay out its provisions for media to counterbalance

³⁹ The Constitution of Georgia (source IJNET)

the decades of communist tradition and suppression of speech. And though the Georgian law is more specific, the Georgian “practice” of allowing free expression and media reporting is much stricter than its early American counterpart. Their law, also, though more explicit leaves gaping loopholes for the government to restrict and censor freedom of the press whenever they chose.

2. Georgia is still a dangerous place to be a journalist – government regulations and violence towards the media are common.

Though many online sources about Georgian media claim that it is relatively independent and regularly criticizes the government, even serving as a “watch dog,” Georgia is a much more dangerous place to be an investigative or independent journalist than the United States was in its earliest days or any period of history. Though American journalists faced the Alien and Sedition Acts and limited access to government, there were few physical attacks on media outlets and practitioners and no one was murdered, as has happened on numerous occasions in Georgian in the last 15 years. The number of violent attacks on the media even in the last five years is staggering and nothing close to the experience of early American printers and media owners. Perhaps, compared to the strictest control under communist rule, the current Georgian media is “free,” but a profession under constant threat of forced closure, government inspection, lawsuit, violence and even death is not “free” at all.

The 2002 World Press Freedom Review claimed that Georgia’s government’s “lack of effective political control after independence...makes officials and other individuals with power paranoid. As a result, criticism of the authorities is not accepted and organizations and individuals that publish such material have faced repercussions...This situation makes

investigative journalism on the topic of corruption a perilous occupation.”⁴⁰ Though official censorship no longer exists, there are many ways to suppress freedom of the press. The most popular methods of suppression are tax inspections, the law of entrepreneurship, the criminal code and unofficial pressure from government officials.⁴¹

Many reports by international journalism organizations report on the violence suffered by journalists each year in Georgia. During 2003, an election year, especially, the government by both direct and underhanded means, attempted to silence the media and avoid public disapproval. Especially in the smaller regions of the country, media are more vulnerable to the whims of local officials. In Kutaisi, Georgia’s second largest city, employees of the region’s only independent radio and television station, Kutaisi Television suffered severe gas poisoning. Kutaisi TV is known for criticizing the regional governor and has broadcast reports about local corruption. Though police concluded the incident was accidental, many were convinced government authorities were to blame.⁴²

This constant threat of violence and censorship from the government or local opposition, such as the church, deters many journalists from investigating and reporting on important issues.⁴³ As a result of the climate of oppression and regulation, self-censorship by the media is common.

3. The issue of self censorship - Government opposition vs. endorsement and Rustavi-2

Though Georgian media is no longer obligated to report the “official” state message and boasts relative media freedom, they now face the challenge of establishing balance between

⁴⁰ 2002 *World Press Freedom Review*

⁴¹ U.S. Department of State – 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

⁴² Committee to Project Journalists, *Attacks on the Press 2003*

⁴³ 2001 *World Press Freedom Review*

opposing political parties and personal political convictions. Various conflicts in Georgia continue to divide the nation and its media politically and ideologically. As a result, the “bias” of media may have shifted from governmental propaganda to excessive support of opposition parties, as in the Rose Revolution. The television station Rustavi-2 is a good example of this phenomenon.

The Rustavi regional television station Rustavi-2 is perhaps the country’s most popular and influential medium. It is known both for both reporting freely on government corruption and actively supporting the opposition bloc that led 2003’s Rose Revolution. They have suffered the violence and censorship of government, non-governmental organizations and unidentified attackers throughout the last decade. There is a struggle, unique to media organizations, between objectivity, independence and survival in the marketplace. Though they investigated and reported the most dangerous incidents and worked earnestly for government integrity and revolution, they have come under recent criticism for being too supportive of the country’s new government. The leaders of the autonomous republic of Adjara, loyal supporters of Shevardnadze, banned Rustavi-2 from broadcasting in the region after the opposition took power.⁴⁴

Attacks and attempts at government oppression are constant for Rustavi-2. In 2001, one of Rustavi-2’s most popular journalists Giorgi Sanaia was shot dead. Sanaia was host for the nightly news and interview program “Courier at Night,” and known for his hard-hitting interviews and exposes of government corruption. Though President Shevardnadze and other officials denied the cause of his murder could be political, Rustavi-2 director Erosi Kintsmarishvili spoke openly about the nation’s belief that government was to blame for Sanaia’s death. Reuters quoted him in saying the killing was attempt to silence free-thinking

⁴⁴ Reporters Without Borders – *Georgia 2004 Annual Report*

journalists, “It’s a warning to all of us not to speak more than we are allowed.”⁴⁵ Though the public outcry after Sanaia’s death was huge, frequent attacks on the press and Rustavi-2 in particular continued. In 2003, on the eve of the flawed elections, the Central Electoral Commission attempted to revoke Rustavi-2’s license. Their greater decree attempting to bar mass media from commenting on politics during the 50 days preceding the election was struck down by a Tbilisi district court.

During and after the election discrepancies and public protest, Rustavi-2 unabashedly supported the opposition bloc, reporting on opposition rallies. Many government officials accused Rustavi-2 of antagonizing the national situation with their coverage and their accreditation was cancelled by the national elections board on November 13. Even after the revolution, attacks on the media continued with an explosion between the state television building and Rustavi-2 headquarters in central Tbilisi.⁴⁶

For outlets like Rustavi-2, the dilemma of Georgian media is clear – both objective and actively partisan reporting are problematic. The media of the country are faced with “censorship” and opposition from all sides – government, non-governmental organizations, other media and even themselves. It is a challenge in itself to strike the balance between professional journalistic standards, safety and economic survival.

In my interview, David Bloss cited the role of Tbilisi-based television station Rustavi-2 in the Rose Revolution. By continuously covering the 2003 elections over three days, its parallel vote counts and ultimate discrepancies, the general population of Georgia were able to follow the story and eventually take to the streets of Tbilisi in protest and revolution. Rustavi-2 proclaimed itself “the station of the revolution” in promos after the November demonstrations and “promptly

⁴⁵ 2001 *World Press Freedom Review*

⁴⁶ 2003 *World Press Freedom Review*

became very sympathetic in its reporting on the new government,” according to Bloss. This identification with government officials or even social causes is detrimental to the media’s “objectivity” in the country and hurts not only the quality of journalism but the public’s perception of media accountability and balance.

The Public

Because of these traditions of media oppression, government influence and biased reporting, the Georgian public is often still skeptical of media credibility and the potential of government influence on message. After decades of acting as the mouthpiece of the government, the Georgian press struggles for independence in ownership, media law and professional standards. Their audience, the citizens of Georgia, also struggle with this shift in perspective and media purpose. The tradition of strict censorship and the constant reporting of attacks on the press understandably breed doubt about truthfulness and balance in reporting, especially about the government. The public, accustomed to openly one-sided and opinionated reporting remains skeptical about the unbiased source.

Exact circulation and readership statistics for this country are incredibly hard to find. Few studies have been done in the region on media influence or even usage. From interviews and other readings, however, we know that even if readership and reach of media is high, the quality of content and influence on government and the public is questionable.

The general notion of the importance of media to democracy and civil society is also new to the country and the Georgian public. Though the extent to which the American founding fathers intended media freedom to reach is debatable, freedoms of expression and of the press are fundamental to the American national and democratic ethic. Georgia and other countries

founding democracies are just beginning to consider these notions of individual expression, media as the watchdog of government and an informed, active citizenry. The newness of independence in Georgian society is evident in its struggling finances, developing professional standards and public perception of the press.

Critics and scholars of the region who have discussed this new media include Tina Tsomaia, an adjunct professor at the Tbilisi journalism school. In an 2004 article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Tsomaia calls for a return to national “dignity” through the development of media and stabilization of the government with public participation. Citing the *Caucasus Context*, Tsomaia discusses the most crucial elements for countries on the path towards democracy: the role of civil society and a free press, the absence of state authority, and, perhaps most poignantly, the importance of national identity and unity.⁴⁷

In his book *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe*, Peter Gross claims that “democracy needs accurate, fact-based journalism because, without it, the decision-making process is itself falsified.”⁴⁸ This foundational theory of media and government is the ultimate aspiration of both American and Georgian media as the face challenges on the path to independence.

⁴⁷ Tsomaia, “Georgia’s Rose Revelations,” *Foreign Policy*

⁴⁸ Gross, *Entangled Evolutions* (4)

Discussion

Is the path to independence the same for all media? Can media values transcend the boundaries of culture, language and past? What pattern, if any, can be followed for the development of independent media in democracies worldwide?

By comparing the media of modern-day Georgia and the 19th century United States, I have tried to answer these questions. Based on four categories of descriptors – Economics, Professionalism, Media Law and The Public – I have studied and described the earliest American printers and their current-day counterparts in Georgia.

My study was limited, of course, by time and resources, but also, in this case, by language and geography. My findings might be more complete if I could have personally traveled to Georgia to conduct interviews, tour media facilities or read Georgian-language publications. With more primary sources, a comparison of early American and modern Georgian media may be more complete, or possibly, produce different results. A Georgian native, like the students training at LSU, would have more insight into the complex history and tradition of this country that is largely foreign to me.

This type of study may also be more successful if it is conducted after 10-20 years. Georgia as a nation may still be “recovering” from recently gaining independence from the USSR and its even more recent Rose Revolution. With time, the turbulent state of government and media may settle and better conclusions could be made. I had hoped, however, that Georgia, in its current state, would be more easily compared to the turbulent days of early American government and media.

Though these limitations prevent me from publishing a complete account of the state of Georgian media with projections about its future, I have found the countries, despite their most

basic differences of language and history, face similar challenges in establishing free and vibrant media. Indeed, contemporary media in the Republic of Georgia and the early United States have similar values, and some unexpected differences and conclusions to our analysis.

Ultimately, the main challenge to achieving independence in media for both countries is financial. We find that, ultimately, media cannot be independent unless they are independently owned and free from political or other special interests. The major challenge to both early American and present-day Georgian media is ownership, financial stability and maintaining objectivity under the pressure of the marketplace and special interest groups.

Our categories of descriptors – Economics, Professionalism, Media Law and The Public – interact in this way. Professional standards such as objectivity and balance are widely dependent on financial freedom and economic stability. Media law dictates not only the boundaries in which media must operate, but also sets the tone for media's role in the greater system of democracy and civil society. The public's usage of the media to achieve the ideal "informed citizenship" affects media secondarily in circulation earnings and financial success. Each of these facets, important individually, interact to create the more complex system of media structure and survival.

The most important similarity between the two countries is something the press alone cannot solve for itself – a weak national economy and marketplace for news. The early United States and modern-day Georgia are both growing nations, where citizens are more concerned with paying for the most basic necessities of life than buying a daily newspaper. Without vigorous business, the need for advertising or substantial circulation to financially support newspapers, printers and modern-day journalists in Georgia must turn to the powerful, the wealthy elite to fund the news, stifling the very core of their "independence." As did the

United States over many decades of growth, the Georgian government and marketplace must develop further before truly independent media in the country can exist.

Professionally, journalists in the two countries struggle with the same issues of writing style, objectivity and ethical reporting. Georgian media, as did the early American press, will take time to settle into a standard of journalistic ethics and accountability. In this respect, however, I find present-day Georgian media to be more sophisticated and advanced than early media in the United States. Georgian journalists are more educated in the craft of journalism and better organized into professional organizations than the earliest American printers.

In the brief 14 years since its independence, Georgia has established journalistic societies, codes of ethics and journalism schools – none of which existed for early American printers. This more rapid development may be due to modern-day technology, examples of successful media worldwide and more developed beliefs about the need for media in democracy. Whatever the reason, it is undeniable that the Georgian media today is, in many ways, superior in philosophy and practice to the early American press. It remains to be seen, however, if these hopeful signs of development are sincere growth the mere appearances of change.

Legally, Georgia and the United States are both identified as “republics,” democratic nations where basic human rights like freedom of speech and of the press are hallmarks. Both countries have explicit laws in their national constitution that protect the rights of journalists and citizen freedom of expression. These laws, however, are also dependent on the interpretation and daily practice of government officials and agencies in both countries.

Media, consequently, are never quite as free as the law might suggest. Though early American printers faced some opposition from government and the freedom to speak has been “restricted” throughout our history, the level of censorship and oppression in Georgia is more

extreme. Georgian journalists face the threat of physical violence and censorship more often than colonial printers. The countless reports of abuse to journalists, attacks on media organizations and blatant censorship by the government in Georgia are incomparable to the plight of American media, today or in the past. This challenge to media in Georgia may be its most difficult to overcome, because a dramatic shift in national sentiment and deep-rooted tradition must first occur.

As citizens of democracies, “the public” in both countries rely on the media for information and participation in public decision making. The practice of democratic participation and “informed citizenship,” however, is just beginning to develop in Georgia and in the region. Clearly, a general notion of the importance of a free and vibrant media in democracy is more firmly rooted in American law and national ethic. I am not convinced that the traditions of dictatorship, communism and suppressed speech can be entirely overcome in this country with such longstanding oppression. It’s important, too, that the country’s new administration will remember its promises for democratic freedom and tolerance and continue the country on its new path towards democratic and media freedom.

The path to independence is different for every nation. Lessons can be learned, however, from countries that have gone before. As it continues to develop and establish a vibrantly independent press, Georgia, too, may become a model for its region.

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