Three former Soviet republics occupy Central Asia’s Ferghana Valley, a region of serious transborder environmental problems, especially ones that involve water and energy. Most news organizations in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan provide little in-depth coverage of these issues. Journalists in one country usually do not seek news sources in the others. Journalists and media experts cite such reasons as avoidance of controversy, self-censorship, lack of access to information, little collaboration, inadequate professional skills, and weak minority-language media.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia’s Ferghana Valley is a region of the former Soviet Union where environmental controversies and conflicts—particularly ones related to water and energy—threaten precarious political, diplomatic, and economic relationships among the three countries that occupy it: Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Other conflict issues in this agriculturally highly productive and densely populated region involve trade, ethnic rivalries, political rights, Islamist organizations, corruption, security, and migration. Megoran observes, “The border’ is more than a line on a map. It is crucial to the struggles over power to identify, claim, and rule post-Soviet Ferghana Valley space” (2010, p. 35). One expert calls the valley “the ‘strategic center of gravity’ of Central Asia—owing to its central geographic location, extremely fertile soil, dense population, strong religious influence, and lack of effective control by central authorities” (Donnelly, 2012, p. 8).

Global climate change looms here as the umbrella problem under which water and energy conflicts threaten to worsen and natural disasters imperil dams, irrigation networks, villages, and industrial sites. The United Nations Environmental Programme/GRID-Arendal roster of potential climate change-related impacts includes desertification, reduced agricultural productivity, an elevational shift in biodiversity, faster melting of ice caps and glaciers, changes in permafrost and snow cover, and lessened river flow (Rekacewicz, 2006).

Water supplies for agriculture and energy generation, particularly hydropower, remain a major cause of tension because Soviet-era centralized administration and allocation of water resources are no longer feasible (Wegerich, Kazbekov, Mukhamedova, & Musayev, 2012). Libert and Lipponen explain:

In Central Asia, the competition between water use for hydropower generation and for irrigation contributes
to serious consequences for the economy of riparians in years with a deficit of water. It also raises the political tension between riparian countries. Hydropower generation is a priority for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the upstream countries, while the downstream countries are more dependent on irrigated agriculture. (2012, p. 567)

One illustration is Uzbekistan’s resistance to Tajikistan’s hope to complete the now-stalled, partly built Roghun hydroelectric project; that disagreement is reflected in Uzbekistan’s December 2012 interruption of natural gas supplies to Tajikistan (Bakhtiyor, 2013).

These tensions are permeated with political and economic ramifications, yet there also are opportunities for newsworthy developments related to community engagement, cooperation, and conflict management.

Barriers to coverage of these transborder environmental issues are consistent with problems identified by researchers who study Central Asia’s press systems in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Among the aspects scholars explore official, quasiofficial, and unofficial constraints on professional journalism practices; ethics and standards; media economics; libel laws; and access to broadcast licenses (Freedman & Shafer, 2011; Kenny & Gross, 2008; Price, 2009; Shafer & Freedman, 2009).

The failure to adequately cover these issues has important implications for policymaking, given the media’s agenda-setting potential. Agenda-setting theory describes the news media’s influence in telling the public what issues are important and, perhaps, galvanizing audiences to pressure government and other institutions to act (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Stone, Singletary, & Richmond, 1999).

There is little published research about journalism specifically in the Ferghana Valley. One exception is Ferrando’s comparative study of ethnic news media published in national languages and in Russian. He noted, “Cross-border communication implicates the relationship between minority media and their kin state. Soviet borders were insignificant, so minority media circulated freely within their respective language group” (Ferrando, 2011, p. 176). However, that study does not focus on press coverage of public policy issues such as environment or obstacles to such coverage.

For a perspective on Ferghana Valley news coverage, it is essential to recognize that all three countries have poor press rights records (Freedom House, 2014; International Research & Exchanges Board, 2013). The Reporters sans Frontières (2014) World Press Freedom Index ranks Kyrgyzstan 97th, Tajikistan 115th, and Uzbekistan 166th among 180 countries.

Press rights advocacy groups, Western governments, and multinational agencies support media development in the region and frequently criticize authorities for violating constitutional provisions for press freedom. Even Kyrgyzstan, whose 2010 revolution was depicted as a regime change that would advance individual and political rights, receives low evaluations from press rights groups. For journalists, working in the Ferghana Valley poses special obstacles that are even more severe than elsewhere in the three countries, including murder and physical assaults.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

In light of political, economic, and cultural conditions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, what obstacles do journalists face in reporting about transborder Ferghana Valley environmental issues?

**METHOD**

A study of transborder journalists in Europe’s Moselle Valley—France, Germany, and Luxembourg—criticized “a significant shortcoming of international communication scholarship. Scholars have . . . largely neglected
the perspectives of working journalists.” It advocated “permitting those actually involved in journalistic production to speak” (Grieves, 2012, p. 6). To understand and interpret how a nation’s press system operates requires scholars to go beyond official reports and statements to ask working journalists how they carry out their duties and what obstacles interfere with their ability to report on topics of public concern, such as the environment.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) noted that in-depth interviews are often used in qualitative research to produce descriptive and exploratory data for issue-focused research. In-depth interviews have been part of prior mass media research about environmental issues in the region. One such study (Freedman, 2011) found that journalists and media owners in two Central Asian countries place low priority on environmental coverage other than in times of crisis. News organizations perceive low public interest in such issues and lack economic and staff resources to comprehensively cover environmental news. Similarly, Toralieva (2011) interviewed journalists and activists in researching obstacles to environmental reporting in Kyrgyzstan. Another interview-based study found weak relations between local environmental organizations and the press (Freedman, 2009).

This article draws heavily on 29 in-depth interviews conducted in May 2012 with journalists, journalism educators, and media expert. They took place in Bishkek and Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and in Dushanbe, and Khojand, Tajikistan. Those cities were selected because two are national capitals and the others are each country’s second-largest city and are in the Ferghana Valley. Interviewees were identified based on the author’s previous research and on recommendations from university journalism faculty, civil society groups, and press rights defenders. They were chosen as a purposeful sample because of their varied experience with a wide array of print, broadcast, and online media, including state, independent, and opposition domestic and international news organizations. Interviews took place in Russian with the assistance of a translator, or in English and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Two respondents in Kyrgyzstan and five in Tajikistan chose to remain anonymous.1 The author also conducted a roundtable discussion in Osh with nine young radio journalists at the bilingual Kyrgyz-Uzbek Yntymak Public Radio.

The author analyzed the transcripts for patterns and common themes to illuminate the Research Question; for deviations from those patterns; for “interesting stories (that) emerge from the responses”; for suggestions of the need for additional data; and for corroboration of prior qualitative analyses (Berkowitz, 1997).

This article is also informed by reports and statements from international press and human rights organizations, civil society groups, news stories about the environment and press freedom, and informal conversations with other experts.

FINDINGS

The most difficult obstacles to covering transborder environmental journalism in the Ferghana Valley fall into six categories:

Avoidance of Controversy

Domestic media fail to adequately cover a range of Ferghana Valley transborder issues. For example, a Dushanbe journalist cited land disputes between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and water disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Anonymous 1 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 21, 2012). A Khojand reporter listed ecology among “dangerous topics” for press coverage, along with HIV/AIDS, transportation, immigration, and relations with Uzbekistan (U. Usmonov, personal communication, May 25, 2012). A journalism educator in

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1Anonymous interviewees are cited in chronological order of their interviews.
Bishkek said bluntly, “The environment is not covered well” (G. Toralieva, personal communication, May 15, 2012).

Reporting on controversies—if it occurs at all—may be one-sided and unbalanced, as in coverage of the proposed Roghun hydroelectric dam in southern Tajikistan. Uzbekistan asserts that the dam will harm its downstream, irrigation-dependent cotton industry, and construction was suspended in 2012. A former reporter for television and an independent newspaper who now reports in Tajikistan for foreign news organizations cited local media stories reflecting only the Tajik government’s official perspective:

The press has been trying to write about it for the past two or three months. Of course it’s the position of Tajikistan that we’re trying to protect the policy of Tajikistan. If we took the other stand, the big people wouldn’t like it. They prefer the press write only about the interests of Tajikistan.

The journalist continued, “If you analyze it without emotion, it would be useful to both countries” (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

Self-censorship

In Kyrgyzstan, journalists say the Ferghana Valley media situation is more precarious and susceptible to outside influence than elsewhere in the country because the June 2010 ethnic violence triggered greater levels of self-censorship, also called “soft censorship.” Journalists in the South admit that they don’t print, post, or broadcast sensitive stories about ethnic relations for fear that the authorities, leaders in either ethnic group, or the public at large blame the press if violence again erupts. For example, the chief editor of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Dushanbe said concern about a second civil war “is one of the reasons they don’t want to write about it ... Most of them don’t want this conflict again” (L. Olimova, personal communication, May 24, 2012). The editor-in-chief of the Dushanbe newspaper Farash and head of the Journalistic Center of Investigation said there’s a lot of pressure on journalists—warnings from the KGB, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other agencies: “This can move to another civil war” (N. Atoivulloevich, personal communication, May 25, 2012).

Lack of Access to Information

The inability to obtain information from government agencies and officials creates barriers to reporting. A newspaper journalist with Osh Shamy (Candle of Osh) said, “Society is not open for giving interviews about the problems we have.... There is a mentality in Osh: They care about the opinions and ideas of other people—what they’ll say about him” (T. Aldakunov, personal communication, May 18, 2012). In addition, bureaucratic procedures can be slow in securing government permission to interview a public official. As one journalist in Khojand put it, “Full information will not be reported by the government. It is trying to freeze this kind of information or ignore it. If I appear deeply interested in it, they could think I’m working for somebody else” (Anonymous 1 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 21, 2012).

Access to information has become more restrictive in Tajikistan, where President Emomali Rahmon used to mandate monthly press conferences by his ministers, but now requires them only quarterly. Even then, officials often devote the full time to reading a report and don’t invite—or “forget” to invite—journalists from independent news outlets (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

Limited Collaboration

There is little collaboration across borders, at least among most journalists who report for domestic media outlets. International organizations have an advantage because they have staff, freelancers, and correspondents in
both countries—and may use freelancers or stringers in Uzbekistan as well. Even for them, however, cooperation with colleagues outside the organization may be informal and episodic. The IWPR chief editor in Dushanbe commented, “Our mass media can work together only with support of donors, not by themselves,” and the situation is complicated by visa requirements and finances (L. Olimova, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

**Inadequate Professional Skills**

Interviewees criticized a low level of professional skills among journalists, impairing their ability to report in a fair, balanced, and accurate manner and to build and sustain public trust. An independent journalist in Tajikistan said one reason water issues aren’t covered is because “journalists lack experience or are not professional or ambitious and think only of themselves” (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 24, 2012). A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty editor in Kyrgyzstan pointed to “a lack of qualified journalists on the ground,” with the exception of those working for international news organizations such as his and the British Broadcasting Corporation. “Even state TV channels, when they do report on these [controversial] issues have very loose reporting.” He attributed the acceptability of bribes to low salaries. Journalists at regional media may earn only $100–$150 a month and in Bishkek $300–$500 a month, “depending on professional level,” although international news organizations pay more (T. Umaraliev, personal communication, May 14, 2012).

As for journalism students—future professionals—the most motivated and talented often prefer jobs in public relations or with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than news organizations because of inadequate opportunities and salaries at local media outlets (G. Toralieva, personal communication, May 15, 2012). One journalist in the South of Kyrgyzstan bluntly said of journalism careers: “Young people don’t want it,” citing salaries that are too low to support a family and the possibility of physical assault or death (Anonymous 1 Kyrgyzstan, personal communication, May 16, 2012). Yet a more optimistic young reporter at Yntymak Radio in Osh said, “Every journalist has to have a dream to be in a higher position, to grow in the job” (Roundtable, personal communication, May 17, 2012).

Another interviewee says new graduates are unqualified because their instructors are unqualified and use out-of-date teaching materials. Young journalists, he continued, “don’t use more sources. There is no balancing of information. It’s mostly emotionally expressing opinions in articles. They don’t check the facts” (Anonymous 3 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 22, 2012). One who reports for international news organizations said bluntly, “The level of professionalism is not high in all the countries [in the Ferghana Valley]. They can’t analyze the situation” (Anonymous 5 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 24, 2012).

**Weakened Minority-Language Media**

Many Ferghana Valley residents do not speak the official or “national” language of their country of citizenship. Thus some ethnic Kyrgyz who live in Tajikistan do not speak Tajik, a language unrelated to their own ethnic tongue. Many residents, especially in villages and rural areas, also do not speak Russian, which still serves as the region’s de facto language of business, government, and higher education.

The interethnic violence of 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan remains a destructive impediment to development of independent and reliable mass media and to news coverage. Osh’s two Uzbek-language television stations were seized and turned over to ethnic Kyrgyz. Their displaced owners fled the country and chose self-exile rather than prison terms; they were convicted in absentia on fabricated charges...
of stirring up ethnic tensions (International Freedom of Expression Exchange, 2011). Many ethnic Uzbek journalists moved from the South to Bishkek or left the country.

Ethnic Kyrgyz also took over two Uzbek-language newspapers. “Uzbek-language media were completely wiped out of the media landscape, with only one 1,000-circulation newspaper left in the South,” but it is state-funded and “on the brink of survival,” a civil society NGO official said. “Television is even worse.” (E. Karakulova, personal communication, May 14, 2012). In Tajikistan’s Sughd Province, a leader of an ethnic Uzbek advocacy group said that aside from a 40-min news show two or three times monthly, “we do not have any TV shows in the Uzbek language. However, local residents with satellite dishes watch programming from stations in Uzbekistan” (Y. Temirovich, personal communication, May 21, 2012).

**DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS**

The six themes that interviewees widely cited illuminate a web of factors—legal, extra-legal, economic, cultural, political, and geographic—that significantly influence the inadequacy of coverage of transborder environmental issues in the Ferghana Valley. Cross-border collaboration, if feasible, could ease some burdens that journalists face in gathering and analyzing full and accurate information, even if their own news organizations ultimately choose not to disseminate their stories.

International news organizations with correspondents, stringers, staff, and freelancers in more than one country already cooperate internally to cover transborder issues. However, collaborative models elsewhere may provide adaptable models for Central Asia, including ones that involve journalists and domestic media organizations in former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact nations. Among them are the Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism (2014) and Journalismfund.eu’s Cross-Border Project (2014).

Certainly the European situation differs from that in the Ferghana Valley. Although Freedom House (2014) does not rate all European press systems as “free,” crossing borders is easy on most of the continent, news organizations generally have more financial resources, and press rights defenders usually have more political and societal influence than their Central Asian counterparts.

In authoritarian countries like those sharing the Ferghana Valley, the press potentially could serve as a foundational institution in a future democratic society with transparent governance and effective means for public participation and safeguarding of individual and political rights. That requires press systems, governments, and civil society institutions that are committed to guaranteeing journalists access to information about topics of public import such as the environment. It also requires that journalists practice ethically, use professional skills responsibly, and be shielded from retribution, violence, punishment, and harassment.

In the Ferghana Valley, natural resources and energy problems clearly are unconstrained by national boundaries. Thus for the public, the press also holds the potential to illuminate problems and challenges common to the transborder region and to explain possible strategies to resolve them—drawing on news sources in more than one country.

Journalists in these countries acknowledge the adverse consequences of such sociopolitical situations on their press systems and professional obligations. They acknowledge their inability to adequately and truthfully cover serious policy issues in the Ferghana Valley. “My material will not be all truth. It will be half-truth. The information will be provided by local people who will give me the full information but I will be afraid to print it,” one reporter in Khojand said. “I will do my article and provide it to my boss, and my boss will decide how much of it will be shown” (Anonymous 2 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 21, 2012). They acknowledge that such distortions,
omissions, and inability to report accurately about policy controversies and events impede public confidence in the integrity and credibility of the press. Asked whether people believe the news they read, hear, or watch on television, the same reporter bluntly responded, “Absolutely not” (Anonymous 2 Tajikistan, personal communication, May 21, 2012).

There are three principal limitations to this study. First, the author did not interview journalists in Uzbekistan because of Western scholars’ difficulty in obtaining visas to conduct research relevant to human rights in that country. However, given that Uzbekistan’s press is the most tightly controlled among the three countries and that its press freedoms are most restricted, it is reasonable to assume that the same obstacles exist there—and to an even more severe degree. Second, this study does not examine whether alternative avenues of disseminating news are filling any of the gaps left by mainstream media. For example, do Web sites, blogs, and social media cover transborder environmental issues, even if they are not written by professional journalists? In fact, studies of social media use in the region are still in their early stages (Ibold, 2010; Wilkinson & Jetpyspayeva, 2012). And third, this study does not incorporate any content analysis of media coverage.

These findings have important implications for environmental journalism in Central Asia. Beyond that, the findings are relevant to identify and address problems that confront journalists elsewhere who seek to report accurately, objectively, and in a balanced way about transborder issues, especially those involving authoritarian countries. The six major problems synthesized from these interviews—avoidance of controversy, self-censorship, access to information, little collaboration, inadequate professional skills, and weakened minority-language media—may create a paradigm useful for examining other conflicted border areas of the world that confront serious environmental challenges.

What about the role of Central Asian journalists since independence, serving as agents of development of national identity and a sense of statehood? That role is reflected in how journalists in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan report about the Roghun dam controversy, relying on biased sources in their own country. Grieves writes that individual journalists even though rooted in national traditions of journalism, “can venture out on their own to build journalistic connections across boundaries. These individuals must chart their own course in determining where the boundaries of border-transcending journalism lie—in philosophical as well as organizational terms. (2012, p. 177)

Given the legal, financial, and operational restrictions in Central Asia, it takes great courage, commitment, and resourcefulness for individual journalists to venture out to build connections and chart their own course. There also may be tactics and techniques they can adapt from transborder journalism elsewhere in the world. That does not mean transnational journalism requires uniformity in content, style, sourcing, or means of dissemination, especially where authoritarian leaders strive to maintain a sense of national identity and statehood in what remain relatively young independent countries. Grieves cautions that it is unrealistic and possibly undesirable to expect that the “distinctive features of the different journalisms—shaped by national cultures and systems—that one encounters around the globe…” will disappear. “[B]order-transcending journalism coexists with ‘national’ journalism, but . . . the relationship is an uneasy coexistence and is fraught with contradictions” (2012, p. 3). That will certainly be true in the Ferghana Valley if meaningful, effective transborder collaborations develop there.

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