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Eric Freedman

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Not a priority: Barriers to environmental reporting in the Republic of Georgia

Eric Freedman 

Environmental Journalism, Michigan State University School of Journalism, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

Despite major ecological challenges and a pluralistic, partly free press system, news organizations in the Republic of Georgia generally provide little environmental coverage to their audiences. Interviews with journalists, media experts, and eco-NGO leaders identified four major reasons for the sparsity of coverage: shortcomings of journalists and news organizations; access to information and news sources; lack of priority; and lack of public demand.

KEYWORDS

Republic of Georgia; environmental journalism; Caucasus; access to information; news priorities

Introduction

On the environmental front, the Republic of Georgia faces major ecological challenges. Among them are threats to the Black Sea, climate change, overgrazing, habitat destruction, hazardous waste, water quality, deforestation and forest management, air pollution, large-scale hydropower projects, gold and manganese mining, litter and solid waste, and invasive species. The implications of such eco-challenges cross national borders and affect economic, political, and cultural relationships on a large geographic scale, in the Caucasus and beyond

As for the mediascape, levels of press freedom, autonomy, and news organization survivability have fluctuated since independence in 1991. The press played a role in the 2003 Rose Revolution that ousted a corrupt and authoritarian administration (Areshidze & Graham, 2007). Even so, the successor regime carried out strong anti-press freedom measures of its own, such as closing a private TV station and blocking Russian websites and TV stations when Russian troops invaded Georgia in 2008. In 2012, Georgia experienced its first peaceful election-based parliamentary change; new legislation at the time strengthened the media's ability to disseminate political information by requiring satellite content providers and networks

to carry all TV stations that broadcast news during the 60 days leading to that election.

However, the Georgian Dream governing coalition that won the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections has become increasingly anti-press in the past three years, exerting political pressure on news organizations. Freedom House (2017, 2019) rates the Georgian press as “partly free” and its Internet as “free.”

Within that political and environmental context, this study explores obstacles to reporting on environmental issues. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with journalists and leaders of media support and environmental nongovernmental organizations, it finds a lack of analytical and in-depth reporting about these issues. Much coverage that does happen focuses on discrete events, such as public protests about development projects, rather than broader investigative examinations of ecological problems, policies, and economics. Such events include April 2019 clashes between residents of the Pankisi Gorge area and police during protests over a controversial hydropower construction project that opponents say could damage the environment and displace residents (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019). Major reasons for the sparsity of coverage include the environment’s lack of priority among news media owners and politicians; staff shortages at news organizations; journalists’ inadequate substantive knowledge about the environment and science; fake news; low public interest; the expenses of coverage; and constraints on access to information.

There has been little academic examination of environmental news coverage in post-independent Georgia or of media-related activities by the country’s eco-NGOs. That dearth of scholarly attention is unfortunate. As Sultanalieva and Freedman wrote in a study of the role of eco-NGOs in generating press coverage of environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan, another post-Soviet state, “Eco-NGOs have the potential to disseminate important ecological-related messages to the public and, thus, help set and build the agenda for public, media, and governmental discussion” (2015: 147). Similarly, Freedman et al. (2018) wrote:

Any gaps in press coverage of environmental news carry serious public policy implications. Shallow or nonexistent coverage weakens the agenda-setting ability of the press, deters efforts to hold government and corporate interests accountable and transparent, impedes public awareness of threats to the environment and health, and reduces the capacity of international donors, funders, and multinational agencies to alleviate ecological perils

This study attempts to help fill those gaps. It begins with overviews of environmental problems and the news mediascape in Georgia. It then presents the research questions, explains how the study was conducted, and relates the findings.

Media landscape

Until independence in 1991, Georgian journalists adhered to the Soviet media model in which the press was integral to the propaganda machine of the state and the Communist Party. Under that model, journalists were: competent professionals; privileged and trusted party members; vehement critics of Western military, social, and economic policies; and avid propagandists for Marxism-Leninism and for unifying the diverse ethnicities and nationalities of the sprawling Soviet empire (Muller, 1998; Hopkins, 1970). There were, of course, inconsistencies within that model. As Hopkins (1970), observed, journalists hypocritically proclaimed their commitment to the people at the same time they disseminated the government's statements and interpretation of events without their own frank, critical analysis. That system made it possible to suppress news of environmental disasters, such as the 1930-1933 great famine and the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear plant accident.

Since then, levels of press freedom, autonomy, and news organization sustainability have fluctuated. In the early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian press was expected to play a crucial role in building democracy and communicating a sense of nationhood to the citizenry (Freedman & Shafer, 2014). Kakachia, Pataria, and Cecire write that Georgia “may be moving again toward democratization (but) has generally fit the ‘competitive authoritarian’ hybrid model.” Although post-independence regimes consistently manifested authoritarian tendencies, the country does have a pluralistic media and has demonstrated a “degree of political competitiveness and pluralism that has set it apart from ‘classical’ authoritarian regimes” (Kakachia, Pataria, & Cecire 2018: 170).

There is no official censorship, but the ruling Georgian Dream party became less and less supportive of press freedom as it consolidated power. There is a close interrelationship between major media outlets and political institutions. The two largest broadcasters, Imedi TV and Rustavi 2, are perceived as having partisan bias and tend to support different parties in covering current events. A survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Center and National Democratic Institute found that Georgians “appear to be selective in trusting media that aligns with their political beliefs...” It found that respondents who identify more closely with Georgian Dream were “more likely to trust Imedi TV for accurate information on politics and current affairs ... than were those who named the [opposition] United National Movement...” and “were more likely to trust Rustavi 2” (Sichinava, 2018).

The government and majority of Georgians aspire to join the European Union and NATO, and the country's media law generally aligns with European standards. Libel was decriminalized, and Article 24 of the constitution guarantees freedom of information: “Everyone has the right to freely receive and impart information, to express and impart his/her opinion

orally, in writing or by any other means. Mass media shall be free. The [*sic*] censorship shall be impermissible” (Gersamia & Freedman, 2017). The country does not censor the Internet.

The annual media sustainability report by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) paints a portrait of mixed results:

For Georgian media, 2017 was a vexing year. Trends that took hold the previous year—including politicization of media and shrinking advertising revenue—tightened their grip on the television stations that provide most Georgians with most of their news. The main, putatively independent state media bodies, the Georgian Public Broadcaster ... and the Georgia National Communications Commission ... showed worrying signs of becoming overtly political actors (IREX, 2018: 261).

IREX, a media- and democracy-supporting NGO, assesses a country’s news media sustainability in five categories of objectives: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions. It rates each category as a) Unsustainable (“Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal”); b) Unsustainable Mixed System (“Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system”); c) Near Sustainability (“Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media”; and d) Sustainable (“Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives.” Overall, Georgia’s media system is in the Near Sustainability category for four of the five objectives, with free press close to a Sustainable rating; it falls into the Unsustainable Mixed System category for business management. The report said:

Business management remained the weakest element of Georgia’s media landscape in a year that saw consolidation of the advertising market, mergers of pro-government channels, and the crisis at Rustavi 2, which was punctuated by the defection of several highly rated programs. With their financial viability at risk, major broadcasters, for the first time, sought income from cable carriers for transmitting their shows, challenging the “must carry, must offer” principle in Georgian law.” (p. 161).

As a result, the country’s score dropped slightly from 2.34 in 2017 to 2.31 in 2018, and to 2.25 in 2019.

Overall, Georgia scores moderately well in Transparency International’s “Corruption Perceptions Index.” That NGO’s latest report places Georgia 41st among 180 countries. Its ranking ties that of Spain, Latvia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and puts it above all but two other former Soviet republics. (Transparency International, 2019).

Moscow’s influence and “soft power” pose a serious challenge to the credibility of the news media. At a September 2018 off-the-record, by-

invitation-only roundtable about the media landscape, a common discussion thread was Russia's growing influence over media outlets. That influence includes significant funding for independent news organization and news websites battered by declining advertising revenue. The roundtable was part of a "The World in 2018 Upside Down" conference sponsored by Arizona State University's McCain Institute for International Leadership and Georgia's Economic Policy Research Institute. The same media-related theme recurred during the conference's public session. For example, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze spoke of fake news and foreign influence over the media. "Russian propaganda is an issue and a challenge," adding, "We're working closely with friends to combat Russian propaganda" (Freedman, 2018). Meanwhile, attitude surveys since 2012 – the most recent conducted in April 2019 – show an average of 75% of Georgians approving the government's aim of EU membership (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2019).

On the positive side, Georgia is a relatively safe place for journalists to work. The Committee to Protect Journalists tallied eight deaths since 1992, but none since 2008, the year of a brief war when Russian troops invaded the country. It has also provided a refuge for journalists from authoritarian Azerbaijan who are in self-exile because it is unsafe to work in their home country. However, in September 2018, the editor of the left-leaning magazine *Liberali* was beaten on a Tbilisi street. According to press reports, the attackers jumped out of two SUVs after phoning him on the pretense of wanting to buy his car (Wayne, 2018).

Environmental landscape

Mountains cover two-thirds of Georgia, and nearly 40 percent of the country is forested (Quinn, 2017). Some of its most serious eco-challenges spill over to neighboring countries. Veliyev, Gvasalia, and Manukyan observe in a study of water cooperation and conflict in the South Caucasus, "As nature is not limited to borders, and the deterioration of the environment has cross-border implications, not only does environmental protection stem from the need to protect livelihoods, but it is also important for avoiding future conflicts or the exacerbation of current ones" (Veliyev, Gvasalia, & Manukyan 2018: 109).

The country's 2012–2016 National Environmental Action Program outlines a series of themes and long-term goals. They include ensuring safe water quality and adequate water quantity; protecting ambient air quality; establishing a modern waste management system, protecting and rehabilitating unique eco-systems and biodiversity; development of sustainable forestry practices; sustainable management of land resources; minimizing

deaths from natural disasters; improving ecological conditions of the Black Sea; and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Ministry of Environment Protection of Georgia, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires government and businesses to balance competing interests, a balance with societal, economic, and environmental consequences. For example, hydropower supplies over 80 percent of Georgia's electricity (Antidze, 2015), and the government has set a goal of getting 100 percent of its electricity from domestic hydropower. However, some activists say proposed large hydro projects could wipe out villages and damage or destroy wildlife habitat. Similarly, a crackdown on illegal logging could be painful for Georgians who rely on firewood for heating and cooking.

Given the wide range of ecological problems, it is impossible to discuss all of them in detail in this study. It draws on recent science and social science research to highlight four major issues with public policy, scientific, and economic implications: water quality and quantity; climate change; forests; and threatened and endangered fauna.

Water quality and quantity

Industry and mining contribute to contamination of Georgia's waters, as do untreated wastewater and urban sewage, illegal dumpsites, and landfills. A recent study of sediments and water in the Mashavera River Basin found high concentrations of heavy metals, including cadmium, copper, zinc, and lead that exceed international and national thresholds (Withanachchi et al., 2018). The sources of those contaminants include gold mining, construction along riverbanks, diversion of untreated municipal wastewater, and outflows from farmlands into the Mashavera and Poladauri rivers and tributaries. Consequences are serious because the basin is an important farming area (Withanachchi et al., 2018).

Transborder water disputes include competing uses for irrigation, human consumption, industry, and fisheries. Floods, drought, and other artifacts of fluctuating climate exacerbate such conflicts.

Elsewhere, there have been instances of transboundary cooperation. That is the case with the Enguri dam and hydropower complex located partly in Georgia and partly in the breakaway Abkhazia region.¹ The biggest hydro complex in the South Caucasus, it supplies most of the electricity for both sides of the border. The cooperation was "born out of economic and social necessity," and allows the facility to continue operating to guarantee energy security (Ibid: 123).

¹Russia-backed Abkhazia is a *de facto* independent country that separated from Georgia after the 1992-1993 War in Abkhazia. Most members of the United Nation consider it legally part of Georgia. Russia is among that handful of countries that recognize it.

Climate change

The Ministry of Environment Protection notes:

Climate [c]hange (CC) and its adverse impacts on ecosystems and the economy are a threat to sustainable development. CC process in Georgia first became apparent in the 1960s and has accelerated since the end of the last century... Precipitation has slightly decreased in most regions of Western Georgia since the 1960s; however some areas have seen increased precipitation. Precipitation in Eastern Georgia has increased by no more than 6%. Due to these changes, the intensity and frequency of extreme events caused by global warming have risen. In semi-arid regions, the frequency of droughts and strong winds in the spring has increased. In the Black Sea coastal zone, coastal erosion and abrasion processes have intensified... When withdrawing, glaciers of the Caucasus leave behind immense quantities of stones, pieces of rock, mud, and resulting mud-flows after intense rains. (Ministry of Environment Protection of Georgia, 2012: 77).

If current climate change trends continue, precipitation along the Black Sea coastline, Colchis lowland, and parts of the Western Caucasus will increase by 50 percent by the end of the 21st century. During the same period, annual precipitation could drop by at least 50 percent on the plains of Eastern Georgia (Elizbarashvili et al., 2017).

Forests

Georgia's forests are important ecologically, economically, and culturally. In 2013, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources Protection and the National Forestry Agency of Georgia produced a concept report for the future of the country's forests. It emphasized biological diversity, the value of forests in supplying natural resource products, their role in providing a clean water supply, their recreational and cultural value, and their ability to provide wildlife shelter and migration that helps maintain genetic diversity of animals (Ministry of Environment & Natural Resources Protection & National Forestry Agency of Georgia, 2013).

Forests face threats from illegal logging and firewood collection, unsustainable levels of legal logging, invasive species, poor land management, inadequate enforcement of forestry laws, climate change, and poverty as a driver of illegal and unsustainable use of forest resources.

A study of the impact of fractured governance of alpine forests says commercial logging operations are exacerbating livelihood and social challenges in those regions of the country. "The turbulence and lack of political administration in forest governance since the Soviet Union's collapse has fostered the development of an international black market, shipping large amounts of illegally harvested timber from Georgia and promoting even more locally intensive degradation of Georgia's forests, especially those

surrounding more easily accessible municipalities and urban areas” (Quinn, 2017: 6-7).

Threatened and endangered fauna

Poaching remains a significant danger to wildlife, especially to threatened and endangered species. Consider the brown bear: Poachers shoot the mothers, orphaning cubs, and usually escape without penalty. Research scientist Khatia Basilashvili of the Tbilisi Zoo explains, “If some person kills a brown bear, nothing happens. The government is not doing anything.” A journalistic investigation of judicial leniency toward poachers examined court records in 390 illegal hunting and fishing cases; it found that only five had been classified as criminal or killing of protected species. All five cases ended with plea bargains, and “no poacher paid a huge fine and nobody was sent to prison.” The other cases were handled as minor administrative charges. The story said that “139 hunters confessed and asked to be assessed a small fine or none at all.” Poachers got back their guns and illegal fishing nets in 58 cases; in 203 cases, violators received only verbal warnings and no fines (Gvasalia, 2017).

Research questions

RQ1: Do journalists and environmental NGO experts see major obstacles to effective environmental reporting in Georgia and, if so, what are they?

RQ2: How do eco-NGOs in Georgia engage with the news media for coverage of their positions on environmental issues, events, and controversies and to help shape the agenda for public and political discussion?

Method

This project draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with journalists, media experts, and eco-NGO leaders; several eco-NGO interviewees are former journalists. Some of them recommended additional interviewees (snowball sampling). It identified potential respondents from multiple sources, including news stories, referrals, and journal articles. The author initially contacted them by email to solicit their participation and informed them that their responses could be used in publications. In addition, the study was informed by additional conversations with journalists, journalism educators, and media, public policy, and environmental experts.

The author interviewed sixteen respondents and/or drew on presentations (guest lectures, which included questions from the students) to the author’s upper-level journalism class at a university in Tbilisi (see [Table 1](#)). Interviews ranging from about 30 to 75 minutes took place in person in

Table 1. Interviewees and Presenters (alphabetical order).

NAME	JOB/POSITION	AFFILIATION	INTERVIEW DATE	PRESENTATION DATE
Basilashvili, Khatia Butkhuzi, Levan	wildlife ecologist director & governing board head	Tbilisi Zoo SEED (Science Environment Education Development)	Nov. 16, 2018 Nov. 30, 2018	
Chakhunashvili, Lia Chergoleishvili, Tamara	chief of party director general	IREX Tabula Media	Nov. 2, 2018 Nov. 30, 2018	
Davliandize, Natalia	geographer & communication specialist	CENN (Caucasus Environmental NGO Network)		Nov. 15, 2018
Getiashvili, Rezo	environmental projects coordinator	CENN (Caucasus Environmental NGO Network)		Nov. 15, 2018
Giacomini, Geof Gurielidze, Zurab Gvasalia, Tsira	executive director director environmental journalist	Caucasus Nature Fund Tbilisi Zoo Freelancer	Nov. 1, 2018 Dec. 5, 2018 Sept. 18, 2018	Nov. 8, 2018
Jonas, Ted Kutidze, David Patarkalashvili, Tamaz	board member editor forestry scientist	Caucasus Nature Fund FactCheck.ge Center for Studying Productive Forces & Natural Resources of Georgia	Nov. 9, 2018 Nov. 14, 2018 Sept. 2, 2018	
Shavgulidze, Irakli	Governing board chair	NACRES (Center for Biodiversity Conservation & Research)	Nov. 19, 2018	
Tchitchinadze, Sophie	communications analyst	UN Development Program	Oct. 23, 2018	
Tkabladze, Melano	environmental economist	CENN	Sept. 14, 2018	
Zoidze, Gogi	project coordinator	GRASS (Georgia's Reforms Associates)	Nov. 14, 2018	

Tbilisi between September and December 2018, as did the presentations, both of which lasted about 45 minutes. All interviewees consented to use of their responses in articles and conference papers. Each interview began with the author again explaining the purpose of the study before moving to a discussion of their professional experience and the background of their organizations. It then then focused on their current work and activities relevant to environmental issues, environmental communication, and environmental journalistic practices in Georgia. The author took detailed written notes, which were later transcribed, but did not record the interviews. The author then analyzed the interviews and presentations by grouping responses based on common content.²

²For more on the qualitative interviewing method used, see Brennen (2012).

A small number of cases may permit researchers to associate closely with respondents by using in-depth interviewing (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). That is an appropriate method in studies such as this one that “scrutinize the dynamic qualities of a situation (rather than elucidating the proportionate relationships among its constituents” (Ibid: 483). Such interviews “target the respondents’ perceptions and feelings rather than the social conditions surrounding those experiences: at least, the collection of the interview material and its interpretation and analysis are not primarily directed toward establishing “objective facts” concerning these conditions” (Ibid: 485). The researchers’ intent is to “generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman, 1993: 91).

Findings

RQ 1 asked about major obstacles to effective environmental reporting in Georgia. Analysis of the interviews and presentations identified four principal themes that help explain limitations and shortcomings of news coverage of environmental topics in the country.

Shortcomings of journalists and news organizations

Interviewee after interviewee bemoaned the level of coverage of environmental topics as generally shallow, sparse, misleading, sporadic, and inaccurate. Tamara Chergoleishvili, director general of the magazine and news website Tabula, put it bluntly: “There is no environmental journalism. There is just coverage of environmental issues. There is no professionalism.” Their observations and complaints focused on three interconnected obstacles: journalists’ lack of knowledge about science and the environment; media owners’ failure to treat the environment as a priority in news coverage, also reflected in inadequate staff and travel budgets and limited career advancement opportunities; and difficulties in obtaining information from sources.

“The national media are so unprofessional when it comes to conservation issues. They don’t understand the issues. If you don’t understand the issue, you can’t convey it to the public,” said Irakli Shavgulidze, chair of the governing board of the NACRES (Center for Biodiversity Conservation & Research). “None of the (news) agencies or companies have specialists.” In addition, journalists are ill-prepared. To illustrate, he recounted what happened when one journalist requested an interview about endangered species. The reporter came to the NGO’s office and “was completely unprepared,” asking questions about species that went extinct millions of years ago. When it came to recent extinctions, “she became disinterested.”

Lia Chakhunashvili, a former environmental journalist and now chief of party for IREX’s M-TAG media development program, described it as a “difficult subject in general” that requires an understanding of science,

while most Georgian journalists have backgrounds in the humanities or, “in the best case,” in social sciences.

In addition, journalists often fail to connect the environment with other issues such as the economy, foreign relations, energy policy, and health. Sophie Tchitchinadze, a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) communications analyst and former journalist, said, “For Georgian media, the environment is regarded as a stand-alone, not linked to economics.” The media realized “only recently that it is an essential part of life, an essential part of economic development, and equally important to social issues.”

Access to information and sources

Journalists encounter obstacles in obtaining information and access to news sources, despite transparency laws. Discussing an investigative project about environmental practices of Georgia’s only gold mining company, Tsira Gvasalia described her inability to obtain information from the local prosecutor, the ministry with environmental responsibilities, and courts. “The company has a close connection with the government,” said Gvasalia, the country’s leading investigative environmental reporter. FactCheck.ge editor David Kutidze noted that the degree of transparency varies among government ministries. “Most public officers try to give us the data completely and quickly. Some don’t. It’s frustrating.”

Also, ordinary citizens are not always willing to talk to the press. When Gvasalia began her gold mining investigation, she visited the small town where the mining took place. Covering the roadways and bus stops were thick layers of dust from uncovered trucks carrying ore to the company’s processing facility. When she asked residents how the pollution affected their everyday lives, people were “very careful. Once I mentioned the name of the company, everybody went silent Everyone worked for the company.” Since then, however, residents have become “more open, more daring to speak of it.”

Levan Butkhuzi, a former editor-in-chief at *National Geographic Georgia* who now heads the governing board of the NGO SEED (Science, Environmental Educational Development) and has a television show about science and the environment on Rustavi 2 says, “The only credible source of information here on the environment is NGOs.” However, journalists should be cautious and not simply accept as true what those groups tell them. That is because eco-NGOs, as news sources, have agendas.

Lack of priority

Journalists and media owners do not consider environmental coverage a priority, especially at the national level, according to Caucasus

Environmental NGO Network (CENN) environmental economist Melano Tkabladze. “If the environmental sector becomes a priority for the government, journalists will try to cover it better.” Gogi Zoidze, a project coordinator for the NGO GRASS (Georgia’s Reform Associates), said the media “reflects what politicians are doing. Politicians don’t give a priority to environmental issues.”

IREX’s Chakhunashvili observed that covering the environment “is not as glamorous as being a political reporter or on TV all the time or having parliamentary credentials... The only beat is politics and Parliament, and maybe here and there in specialty publications.” Owners and top-level managers determine how to allocate the limited resources of their organizations, which leaves individual reporters with little discretion or control over assignments. She said, “The new generation of journalists is more concerned about environmental issues but in many cases lack knowledge or are not as powerful in the newsroom to decide” what to cover.

That mirrors what a study of environmental news coverage and eco-NGOs in Kyrgyzstan found: “As eco-NGO representatives emphasized in interviews, ecological issues are not popular topics on the media agenda, while coverage priority focuses on economics and politics” (Sultanalieva & Freedman, 2015: 159).

Lack of public demand for more environmental coverage

There is no widespread demand among the citizenry for more environmental coverage. Asked about media coverage of NACRES, Shavgulidze responded, “We have so many other issues people are concerned about, the media probably is trying to respond to issues the public perceives as problems.” He continued, “People are less interested in the forest and (things) outside their visible world because overall conservation awareness is not very high in this country,” although it is “getting a little better.

Misinformation, disinformation, and “fake news” weaken what environmental coverage exists. Tabula’s Chergoleishvili identified an “inability to differentiate fake news from original sources” among the problems in journalism ethics. Environmental reporter Gvasalia said fake news on Facebook claimed a hydroelectric project would “elevate local people” and provide “great social benefit.” She cautioned, “Seventy percent of this needs to be double-checked.”

FactCheck.ge is a nonpartisan independent news website that “offers readers researched, verified and evidence-based information” staffed by “a team of motivated and like-minded individuals (that) brings together young professionals in the fields of journalism, economics, law, international relations, public policy, and other realms.” It monitors parliamentarians,

government officials, and public figures and “highlights factual accuracies and inaccuracies in their statements.” For example, it reported that the mayor of Tbilisi, who had campaigned on a promise of bolstering the city’s green spaces, falsely claimed the city had planted a half-million trees. However, it also verified the accuracy of a politician’s challenged statement that urban lead levels had dropped to allowable levels after the country implemented European standards for petrol.

Eco-NGOs and the press

RQ2 asks how environmental NGOs relate to the press. A dominant goal of public relations specialists is agenda-building or agenda-setting. From the perspective of Georgian eco-NGOs, their mission includes outreach—selling their accomplishments to build political and public support., “Media outputs” such as press releases by eco-NGOs area critical form of environmental communication” (Smith, 2019). Most interviewed NGO representatives said that includes active efforts to build relationships with news organizations and individual journalists who can carry their stories to broader publics. The UNDP’s Tchitchinadze said, “Communications work is an essential part of UNDP work in Georgia... Communication and advocacy are very much linked,” and the media “is one of our very good partners.”

Eco-NGO representatives recognize that most coverage of their organizations is event-driven and does not reflect in-depth, investigative, analytical, or sustained reporting. They express frustration with lack of media interest and with the sparse knowledge most journalists have about environmental and science issues. As Giacomini of the Caucasus Nature Fund said, “There’s not much in the news about the environment unless a disaster happens, such as the massive 2017 wildfire in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park.” Ted Jonas, a Caucasus Nature Fund board member, says reporters have been showing up at public meetings about controversial road projects in northeastern Georgia. “If somebody lies down in front of a bulldozer, they’ll be there.” Referring to the government’s promise to build more hydroelectric projects, reporter Gvasalia said river data and environmental assessments connected with such projects are not deeply covered.

The novel and unusual attract media attention, and novelty is a fundamental element of newsworthiness in coverage of science (Molek-Kozakowska, 2017). To illustrate, zoo scientist Basilashvili said, “When something happens” – as when a zoo elephant underwent tusk surgery in 2018 “it’s a big story (in) every TV and newspaper.” The elephant story was big enough to draw coverage by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Reuters, as well as by Georgian media. Kutidze of FactCheck.ge said

local journalists are more likely than national media to cover environmental news unless “something happens”; when there are tensions among the local populace, “the media try to cover only the protests, not the context,” and pay attention “only when an issue becomes hot.” However, Tbilisi Zoo director Zurab Gurielidze also noted that when the zoo invited journalists to a 2018 workshop about two of its projects being conducted with international experts, “journalists were quite interested” although some “have no scientific knowledge.”

CENN works with the media on all its projects and conducts media tours. CENN’s Tkabladze said, “We are using the media as a tool” with ministries and to raise local awareness of its work. CENN conducts competitions and workshops for journalists and, takes journalists to “hot spots” like illegal logging sites and giving them an opportunity to talk to community residents. CENN’s Davliandize said journalists are “mostly eager to participate, but the quality of reporting projects is still even poor after media tours and workshops.” Journalist-turned-environmental projects coordinator Rezo Getiashvili said CENN partners with journalists who need information and “grounding” but have limited time; “We have friends who call us when they need support from us, and we can call them when they need support from us.”

UNDP issues press releases, pitches stories, and takes reporters into rural parts of the country. On one media tour in September 2018, UNDP (2018) took journalists to Machakhela National Park and nearby villages to display the agency’s sustainable development work. The overarching goal, Tchitchinadze said, is to show linkages between economic development and sustainable development.

While most eco-NGOs seek press coverage, the Caucasus Nature Fund has been an exception. Executive director Giacomini said, “We have a unique focus on funding national parks. No one else does it. It has not been in our interest to publicize that... We haven’t found the need to trumpet what we do, to announce it to the Georgian or Armenian public.” However, it held a public event with a member of the Cabinet to mark the 10th anniversary of its work in Georgia.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of the analysis show an interrelationship among barriers to effective independent environmental journalism in Georgia. We can categorize these obstacles through the structure of Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) five-level Hierarchy of Influences model of constraints on media content. For example, shortcomings of journalists fit into the individual level, while their treatment of the environmental beat as comparatively

unimportant in their day-to-day work fits into the routine level. Meanwhile, news organizations' shortcomings and their failure to regard environmental coverage as a priority are at the organizational level. Poor access to information and sources fits into the extramedia level. Finally, the public's apparent lack of interest in environmental issues can be viewed as ideological. These simultaneously present challenges for eco-NGOs seeking public support and education on their positions through the press. For example, if they cannot interest individual journalists in covering their opinions and work, they lose an important avenue toward influencing decisionmakers in government and the private sector. Conversely, if journalists see no career benefit in covering environmental issues, they will also see little benefit in developing and maintaining reliable news sources at these NGOs.

Georgia's environmental problems and challenges will continue, propelled by such factors as changing climate, migration from rural areas to cities, expanded ecotourism, the drive for self-sufficiency in electricity from hydropower, the need to obey European Union environmental mandates and standards, and economic development. Meanwhile, the mediascape will continue evolving in the context of political development, financial challenges to media organizations, the growth of alternative media, widening use of social media, limited career opportunities for journalists, and disinformation campaigns from abroad.

Implications for public policy are significant. News organizations have the potential to help set the agenda for public debate on environmental issues and to help shape decisions on how to address those issues. As Greenberg and Hier observed, "By selecting which events to report, interviewing and quoting experts who interpret those events, and assembling and distributing the final news product, news organizations create the discursive environment in which collective problematization about troubling events may occur" (Greenberg & Hier 2001: 564). Under the agenda-setting theory of mass communication, the press filters and shapes reality rather than reflecting reality, and media focus on a small number of issues and topics, leading the citizenry to perceive those issues as more important than others (University of Twente, n.d.). As McCombs and Shaw (1972) explained, the media's agenda-setting effect assumes that mass media can transfer the salience of issues to the public. That process depends on two contingent conditions, according to McCombs and Reynolds (2009): a need for orientation and issue obtrusiveness. The first relates to the relevance of an issue to a reader's personal life and an effect on the community. The second relates to personal experience with the issue independent of exposure in the press (Demers et al., 1989).

Absent, inadequate, erroneous, superficial, or low-quality environmental reporting may adversely affect the citizenry and on governance. It undermines well-informed decision-making by voters and policymakers. It weakens the ability of analysts, activists, and policy-shapers to recommend effective courses of action to address environmental problems. It impedes transparency by governments, businesses, and eco-NGOs.

Is environmental journalism in Georgia changing for the better? The answer is unclear. Gvasalia, the investigative reporter, has seen some attitudinal changes since she started covering the environment: “Now the younger-than-me journalists are interested, and younger editors think the environment is a priority.” Given the complexity of the obstacles, overcoming them with the goal of improving environmental coverage will remain difficult. For example, the partisan allegiances between political parties and news organizations are deeply rooted in perceptions of mutual benefit, while the struggle to financially sustain independent journalism will continue amid the country’s economic situation and the growing availability of “free” media through the Internet. Understandably, individual journalists interested in career advancement will continue to aspire to what are considered prime beats, such as Parliament, rather than beats such as the environment that do not appear to provide as rapid a pathway to advancement.

One possible partial solution to the dearth of accurate and in-depth environmental reporting may be to bypass the press and create a cohort of concerned citizens or scientists trained to disseminate news about ecological topics, two interviewees suggested. “You can train environmental journalists but it’s easier if you can train biologists, etc. who decide to become journalists. It’s an easier way to have journalists who can read maps, numbers, and statistics,” Shavgulidze of NACRES said. Butkhuzi of SEED said many people “can’t differentiate between fake news on the environment. That made me think: Is the *NatGeo* [*National Geographic*] audience the audience I really want to work with? Do they really need information about the environment? Most of them know English and have access to reliable information.” That thinking led to trainings for the public and students on topics like photography and filming of environmental topics and how to write engaging blogs and feature articles.

ORCID

Eric Freedman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5326-8252>

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