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OPINION

How governments bully newspapers

Support for independent world press is going to have to become an exercise in philanthropy.

By Barbara Frye

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It was a distressing, but hardly surprising, phone call. On the line was a regular contributor to Transitions Online (the magazine I edit for). Still in shock, she was calling to tell me that she had just been put on one month's unpaid leave from her newspaper in Russia.

She was the only reporter left on staff.

By now, stories of dying newspapers have become familiar to readers in the United States. But whereas in the West the phenomenon is largely a result of declining circulation and

competition from online publications, in Russia and elsewhere it has been helped along mightily by governments. (See story, page 10.)

As independent voices fall silent, the world faces yet more places, from Albania to Zimbabwe, where opposition politicians have limited access to media and where dissenting opinions can make themselves heard only through violence or extremism.

Independent, and often critical of the Kremlin, our contributor's newspaper received no lucrative government advertising revenues, and in the financial crisis its advertising from private companies had all but dried up. The paper has since limped back, heavily reliant on wire services, but its future remains in doubt.

As she had written in a recent column for us, "Government officials across Russia have close ties with the business community, and, for any private media enterprise, a clash with powerful people may result in direct financial losses. Russian editors have learned to read the warning signs."

In a report released in January, the National Endowment for Democracy's Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) examined the apparently growing problem of "soft censorship":

governments using their advertising funds, or pressuring private companies to use theirs, to reward sympathetic media and to punish critical outlets.

Our correspondent in Albania, Besar Likmeta, wrote of a carrot-and-stick approach used by that country's government toward the media. The stick: harassment, newly discovered delinquent tax bills, and straightforward fines.

The carrot: "The benefits for compliant media include long, publicly funded advertising campaigns that present government achievements in fighting corruption and in building schools and infrastructure," Mr. Likmeta wrote.

In many of these countries, newspapers have been the only independent voices, so it is mostly print journalism that is being targeted. In Russia, the Kremlin long ago took direct control of some television channels and made sure that others were in friendly hands.

The Internet is hardly a suitable substitute. In many of these countries, its penetration is still negligible. In the most repressive places, websites are blocked or patrons of Internet cafes must provide identification upon entering so that, at best, they will be intimidated into avoiding websites deemed questionable by the government. At worst, they can be tracked down later.

The CIMA report cites an example brought to light in September by Mexico's Center for Journalism and Public Ethics (CEPET):

"CEPET released word that Gov. Mario Marín Torres of Puebla State denied advertising contracts to three online news sites that were critical of his administration and had reported on his alleged connection with a businessman implicated in a pedophile ring. Rodolfo Ruiz Rodríguez, the director of one of the three online newspapers, e-consulta, told CEPET, 'It's absurdly unfair; they provide contracts to media outlets that have no ratings and that cannot provide valid circulation numbers, yet they cut us off because we are critical.' "

Some commentators have argued that the root of the problem is government advertising itself. Surely the kind of self-congratulatory propaganda that Likmeta cites in Albania is a waste. But there is a place in the pages of a newspaper for public health and education campaigns, as well as for public notices of bids and calls for proposals. Without such advertising, government is less open and less responsive to its citizens.

Many outlets in countries where the private sector and its attendant commercial advertising are underdeveloped will remain dependent on government advertising.

The CIMA report offers a few possible solutions, such as promoting transparency in the awarding of government advertising contracts, requiring governments to place advertising in outlets that reach the intended audience, running independent media as nonprofit organizations, or, in places where press freedom laws exist but are not enforced, taking the matter to court.

The good news is that countries wanting to join NATO have to have democratic governments, and the European Union requires adoption – and enforcement – of a host of laws that ensure basic freedoms. However, the European Commission also should recognize the problem of soft censorship.

As for the rest? In poorer countries, little foreign aid is tied to reform of such practices. Even in countries that have the trappings of democracy – throughout the former communist bloc in Europe, for instance – citizens have little history of a free press and tend to react with a shrug to issues of media manipulation or intimidation.

And then there's Russia. In its most recent Media Sustainability Index report, the nonprofit International Research and Exchanges Board, which works to develop independent media and civil society, cited an October 2007 survey that found only 2 percent of

Russians regard the freedom to receive and disseminate information by any lawful means as one of their most important constitutional rights.

Some Russians have looked the other way as long as their standard of living and Russia's prestige were on the upswing. Perhaps that will change as more independent voices go silent or as people's financial situations sour during this downturn.

Russia, of all places, provides a model for how independent newspapers can survive. Novaya Gazeta, where frequent Kremlin critic Anna Politkovskaya worked until she was gunned down in 2006, publishes thanks to the largess of its deep-pocketed owners, Mikhail Gorbachev and oligarch Alexander Lebedev.

Further, throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia, small, grant-funded, largely online publications that, like mine, double as journalism training centers, are reaching young reporters fed up with the twisted journalism they see at home. Helping to support independent media around the globe is going to have to become an exercise in philanthropy.

A change in laws or attitude must come along to rescue some of these media, otherwise the economic crisis will likely just finish the job that their governments started.

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