Covering Religion-Related News and Conflicts in the Caucasus: A Case Study of a Western "Christian Initiative" News Service

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Abstract

This study examines how a Christian-oriented Western press organization covers religion-related news in the Caucasus. Coverage in 2005 overwhelmingly focused on Christianity. Although governmental sources are more likely to be cited than religiously affiliated sources, comments of religiously affiliated sources receive more prominence. The analysis also examined unnamed news sources and use of key words related to terrorism and violence.

რელიგიური დატვირთვის ახალი ამბების გაშუქების გზები და კონფლიქტები კავკასიაში

ერიკ ფრიდმანი, უანგ-კუო ჩანგი, რიჩარდ შაფერი

ნაშრომი შეისწავლის თუ როგორ აშუქებს დასავლური პრეს-ორგანიზაცია რელიგიური დატვირთვის სიახლეებს კავკასიაში. 2005 წელს საინფორმაციო მოცვა ფოკუსირებული იყო ქრისტიანობაზე. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ სამთავრობო სექ-ტორის წარმომადგენლების ინფორმაციის წყაროდ გამოყენება უფრო ხშირად ხდება, ვიდრე საეკლესიო წარმომადგენლებისა, მათი კომენტარები დიდ მნიშვნელობას იძენს. ნაშრომი ამასთანავე შეისწავლის დაუსახელებელი წყაროების, ტერორ-იზმისა და ძალადობის შემთხვევაში გამოსაყენებელ საკვანძო სიტყვათა საკითხს.

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Atheism was official policy throughout the Soviet Union until 1991. During the Soviet era, however, the range of governmental activity against religious practitioners and organized religious sects varied tremendously within the constituent republics. After the official atheism, practitioners of different religions encountered different degrees of religious freedom from newly independent country to newly independent country.

The Web-based news service Forum 18 concentrates on religion-related news and conflicts in the Caucasus and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, primarily for foreign audiences. Although it is a self-described "Christian initiative," coverage extends to Islam and other non-Christian religions. Foreign governments and international religious rights advocacy groups closely follow its stories.

This study uses content analysis of all stories posted in 2005 about the three countries to look at which religions appeared most often, how governmental and religiously affiliated news sources—named and anonymous—are quoted, and how frequently stories include key words related to terrorism and violence.

While religion and religion-based conflicts in the post-Soviet Caucasus have drawn considerable research attention, scholars have almost completely ignored how the press in and outside the region report on religion-related news. On a broader level not specifically about the Caucasus, research about press coverage of human rights generally has not separated religion freedom from other human rights topics. This article attempts to fill part of that gap through a case study of how one Web-based news service covers religion-related events in a region where domestic media often are constrained from providing such coverage. The credibility of Forum 18, like that of other news organs, is a determinant of how much foreign audiences can rely on its reporting as fair, balanced, and accurate.

The Religious Setting in the Southern Caucasus

Religion, politics, and public policy are interwoven in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, albeit in different ways than before and during the Soviet era. All three regimes tightly control

religion and domestic and foreign media, and deeply rooted religious conflicts persist. The Center for Religious Freedom, a division of the U.S.-based NGO Freedom House, ranked them "partly free" in religious freedom for the study year—with Armenia and Georgia ranked higher than Azerbaijan. In all three countries, people who convert from the majority religion often face social prejudice, and proselytizers for minority religions frequently encounter hostility (U.S. State Department, 2005).

An examination of the interrelationships among religion, politics, and public policy in the region shows evidence of greater diversity in religious belief and practice than may be anticipated. Also, the examination indicates that government methods and policies for controlling religion are primarily modifications of those exercised by the Soviet Union.

The dominant Orthodox churches of Armenia and Georgia remain pillars of nationalism, maintaining deep cultural and political attachments for their adherents; thus in some ways, relations between religion and government are less problematic than in Azerbaijan. Official Christian church authorities are clearly identifiable and can be manipulated and controlled by government; they in turn can influence government and avoid aspects of authoritarian control. There is said to be a merger of nationality and religion, or what Johnston (1993: 238) terms a "religio-nationalist subculture" or "network of highly trustworthy but usually covert social relations that stand in opposition to public life and official values of the state." Such a subculture is particularly evident in Armenia and Georgia, where the national churches have historically carried and conveyed national culture.

In contrast, Azerbaijan has not had the same experience. Azerbaijani Muslims lack a parallel central authority and identifiable national religious leadership. There is also more diversity in culture, language, and ethnic traditions among its Muslim ethnic groups. Thus the government generally has perceived Muslim communities as a greater threat to stability due to fears of outside agitation and imported Islamic fundamentalism, which might lead to jihad-like insurgency.

The Soviets were effective at perceiving such threats to their own power and stability and at placating Muslims by creating republics that served their nationalistic aspirations, as Johnston explains. They were adept at reducing internal religious tensions,

particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia where clashes between Muslims and Orthodox Christians historically had occurred. This is not to say that Soviet methods of religious repression were humane or non-violent, but the most brutal methods of repression, primarily during the Russian Revolution and civil war of the early 1920s, were tempered with policies to empower minorities as Soviet citizens of a socialist state. They astutely recognized and mitigated threats from Islamic-inspired nationalism. For example, they created autonomous and semi-autonomous political units based on religion and ethnicity, and to a high degree overlooked religious practices and ceremonies centered in homes or small communities. Although authorities closed thousands of mosques, the U.S.S.R was usually able to reduce religious tensions and placate and co-opt Muslim religious leaders.

Certainly centuries-old animosities between Muslims and Christians in the region have contributed to destabilization, while hindering political, economic, and other aspects of development. Religion has also served as a building block for nationalism, particularly in Armenia and Georgia where the two forces are virtually merged. Nationalism, in turn, contributes to regional conflicts and territorial disputes when national interests collide.

International consumers of news and information are used to reading about religious clashes and are quick to accept simplistic attribution to Muslim-Christian or Muslim-Jewish animosities as a primary reason for violence and warfare. Thus the dominance of religion as an explanation for conflict in the Caucasus might be attributed to journalists' propensity to select explanations that require the least research, analysis, and explication.

For centuries the region has been a stage for conflicts, intrigues, and maneuvering among former regional superpowers Turkey, Russia, and Iran. Religion is only one of many factors these empires manipulated to cause strife, including economic, geostrategic, and military advantages, expansionism, and colonial consolidation.

Residents of two of the countries are predominantly Christian; the third is overwhelmingly Muslim (Table 1). The rest of this section presents an overview of the historical role of religion and the state of religious freedom in the region during the study period.

Table 1:
*Religious breakdown of the population of the three Caucasus republics**

Country	Muslim	Orthodox**	Armenian Apostolic	Other
Armenia	0%	0%	94%	6%
Azerbaijan	93.4%	4.8%	0%	2.3%
Georgia	11%	75%	8%	6%

* There is no religious breakdown for Nagorno-Karabakh, which Forum 18 categories as separate from Armenia and Azerbaijan, but the majority of residents are Armenian Apostolic.
** Russian, Georgian, and Armenian Orthodox combined
Source: Freedom House (2005)

Armenia

Perhaps because of homogeneity regarding religious beliefs and practices, Armenia's laws are comparatively liberal, with Article 23 of the constitution guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Since 94 percent of the population identifies with the Armenia Apostolic Church, internal religious conflict is minimal.

The Christianization of Armenia is said to have determined the course of that nation's history. The Armenian alphabet was created in 406 specifically to serve the spiritual needs of Armenian Christians. Battles, such as that at Avarair in the 5th century against Persian attempts to re-impose Zoroastrianism occurred throughout Armenian history. Such conflicts reinforced the church and sense of nationalism, but must be viewed as more than simply religious-based conflicts. Certainly with regard to Persia, Armenian uprisings and insurgency represented resistance to imperialism (Tchilingirian, 1996). Armenians were also subject to successive Arab, Mongol, Egyptian, and Turkish conquerors, reinforcing the national character of the church when Armenian government was non-existent.

During World War I, Armenians suffered from massacres at the hands of the Turks (Sutherland et al., 1988). Although that genocide is often interpreted as based on Muslim (Turkish) and Christian (Armenian) historical hostility, Turkey in 1915 was fighting Russia and the Western allies. The Russians actively recruited Armenian battalions from within Russia; these battalions, in turn, recruited ethnic Armenian (Christian) troops from within Turkey. Because of fear of Turkey and as a result of massacres, the Armenian church generally supported Russia in response to pressures from Islamic forces. Later, Armenian Christians were not subjected to the degree of repression that other religions experienced in the Soviet Union.

The church generally remained acquiescent under Soviet rule. For instance, it stayed silent about conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in the 1980s, and often served Soviet policy goals, or at least offered little resistance to them. The church continues to play a central role in civic and political affairs, and has had more participatory and democratic organization than the Georgian Church, or other Orthodox churches of the region (Johnston).

Registered religious groups generally reported no major legal obstacles to their activities (U.S. State Department, 2005). The government does not enforce its prohibition on foreign funding for foreign-based churches and imposes no travel restrictions on religious groups. However, a 1991 law bans proselytizing, and Jehovah's Witnesses, who are conscientious objectors, reported hazing while doing alternative military service.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is over 90 percent Moslem. Arab invaders transplanted Islam in the 7th century; the first shah of the Safavid Dynasty established Shia Islam as the state religion in the 16th century. Both Turkic Sunni and Iranian Shia forces influenced the Safvid court, so Azerbaijan adopted a dual character with regard to Islamic beliefs and practices; most Azerbaijani Muslims are nominally Shia.

There appears to have been a significant expansion in religious belief and practice connected to its political and ideological transformation following independence. Gusyn-zadeh (2004) suggests that an Islamic religious renaissance is taking place. While observance seems to be growing, there is also a revival and expansion in other traditional religions. Gusyn-zadeh attributes this

trend to a natural resurgence after seven decades of anti-religion policies, but says that the government has continued to repress religions it deems threatening.

Article 18a of the constitution declares separation of religion from the state and provides that all religions are equal before the law. It prohibits spreading certain types of religious "propaganda" and contradicting the principles of humanism. It states that religious rituals should not violate public order and contradict public morals.

Human rights observers report that the government engages in harassment of religious minorities from fear of social changes it cannot control, and engages in repression, primarily through pressuring for registration of religious organizations in violation of the country's commitments as a member of the Council of Europe and the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Since Azerbaijan recognizes thirty national and ethnic groups, it is in many cases simplistic and inaccurate to attribute internal divisions and conflicts solely to religious strife.

Both Islamic and Christian communities have been subject to police raids, beatings, denial of registration, and other harassment. Muslims are the victims of the highest degree of state intrusion; all Muslim communities are required to be part of the state-sanctioned Caucasian Muslim Board. It is apparent, according to Forum 18 editor Felix Corley, that the government fears Muslim opposition and credits Muslims with the greatest potential to mobilize organized resistance.

The Azerbaijani government is fundamentally hostile to the idea of religious freedom, seeking to control faiths it regards as a potential challenge (especially Islam), to co-opt faiths it sees as useful (Judaism, Russian Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, and Catholicism) and to restrict as far as it can other faiths with a small following and who function unobtrusively, such as Molokans (an early Protestant group). Georgian Orthodox and Baha'is, tend to escape government attention (Corley, 2003).

A U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom Report said the regime limited religious freedoms such as delaying or denying registration to some Protestant groups, harassed and occasionally raided meetings of religious minorities, and impeded importation of religious literature. Non-traditional sects such as the Baha'i faced particular difficulties in remote areas, and author-

ities restricted what they asserted were political and terrorist activities by clerics operating independently of the recognized Muslim community. The report commended the government for actively promoting interfaith understanding, however.

The fear of Muslim insurgency is similar to fears and repression of Islam in other ex-Soviet republics such as Uzbekistan. The government, which prides itself as secular, obviously worries about an Islamic-inspired revolution. It maintains tight control over religions, although some experts predict that the rise of more assertive Islam is inevitable in light of poor socio-economic conditions and disappointment in Western policies that are seen as damaging national interests. Azerbaijanis also object to U.S. aid to the separatist Karabakh regime and to the failure of the international community to force Armenia to relinquish occupied territory (Ismailzade, 2005).

Georgia

Georgians converted to Christianity in the 4th century, and the sense of Georgian identity, greatly influenced by the Orthodox Church, has been a powerful force against domination by outside forces. Since 1783 when independence was guaranteed in return for Russian suzerainty—other than 1801 to 1864 under Persian domination—the country has been closely aligned with Russia. Georgians have always resisted Russian controls on the church but pragmatically accepted Russian protection from potential invaders.

Under the U.S.S.R., nationalism was strongly expressed and exalted through a flowering of literature, language, cinema, art, poetry, and theater. This resulted in preservation of the symbolic place of the church through emphasis on its historical role as preserver and protector of language and culture, making the Orthodox Church rather than the corrupt Soviet-supported bureaucracy the primary agent of change (Johnston).

While reported physical attacks on religious minorities are down, members of nontraditional denominations such as Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptists claim they have been intimidated and threatened by local Orthodox priests and practitioners, with inadequate protection from police (U.S. State Department, 2005). Prosecutors failed to aggressively pursue criminal charges against Orthodox extremists who engaged in violence. The State Department cited improvements in religious freedom, including easier registration and importation of religious literature

and the imprisonment of a defrocked Orthodox priest for inciting religiously induced violence.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The deadly struggle in Nagorno-Karabakh, where ethnic Armenians are the dominant population in an area within the borders of Azerbaijan, is the region's most prominent conflict. While religion and nationalism are the primary variables used to explain that conflict, the United States Institute of Peace (1998) asserts that geostrategy and geopolitics are far more influential factors, particularly the interests and ambitions of Turkey. Although religion is often an important aspect of ethnicity, its status is relegated to a lesser variable in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The title of Matveeva's article, "Nagorno-Karabakh: A Straightforward Territorial Conflict" (2002), sums up the supporting argument that the bloody confrontation has hinged on Armenians in Armenia supporting their ethnic kin in Karabakh. Matveeva's complex analysis of the conflict and recommendations for resolving it make almost no mention of religion as a primary factor, either as a cause or an operational solution to the stalemate.

Still, foreign governments and influential international peace and trade organizations often join news organizations in citing religion as a critical factor in terrorism, violence, and episodes of civil war in the Caucasus. As with reporting and commentary on strife in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Sudan, and the constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia, the people of the Caucasus have been typecast as intolerant, often turning to violence on religious grounds. Certainly it is easier for a "parachute journalist" covering a breaking story on an *ad hoc* basis to allude to historical Moslem-Christian animosity when violence occurs in the region. Such episodic reporting often fails to adequately explain other possible significant factors that raise tensions and contribute to violent responses, such as those related to ethnicity, economics, or nationalism.

Press Constraints in the Southern Caucasus

In post-Soviet republics, there is often a correlation between the presence or absence of religious freedom and the presence or absence of other human rights such as freedom of the press; such

regimes have used ostensible threats from Islamist fundamentalists to justify suppression of press and speech rights (Freedman and Walton, 2006)). Constraints on the press, both official and through self-censorship, make it difficult—even dangerous—for domestic journalists to cover religious conflicts and other public policy controversies (Freedman, 2005a, 2006b). Thus foreign news organizations are often the only media to cover such issues, although their audiences are predominantly outside the countries covered.

As with religious freedom, the constitutions nominally guarantee a fee press. Article 50 (2) of the Azerbaijan constitution states, "Freedom of mass media is guaranteed. State censorship in mass media, including press is prohibited." Georgia's Article 24.2 provides, "Mass media is free. Censorship is prohibited," although Article 24.4 hedges that guarantee by saying press freedom "can be restricted by law and by the conditions necessary in a democratic society for the guarantee of state and public security, territorial integrity, prevention of crime, and the defence of rights and dignities of others to avoid the revelation of confidentially received information or guarantee the independence and impartiality of justice." Armenia's Article 24 states that "everyone is entitled to freedom of speech, including the freedom to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas through any medium of information, regardless of state borders, but Article 39 provides that "the presence of the news media and representatives of the public at a judicial hearing may be prohibited by law wholly or in part, for the purpose of safeguarding public morality, the social order, national security, the safety of the parties, and the interests of justice."

In October 2004, journalists and NGO representatives from the three countries held their first South Caucasus Media Conference, producing the Tbilisi Declaration on Libel and Freedom of Information. The declaration advocated eliminating criminal libel statutes, banning libel suits by public officials, limiting civil damages in defamation cases, adopting comprehensive freedom of information laws, and limiting what government documents may be kept secret (Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2005). Beyond governmental restraints and self-censorship, other major obstacles impede wide-scale improvement in professional journalism standards, ethics, and skills in the Caucasus. They include scarce resources for independent news organizations; low salaries for journalists and journalism faculty; lack of media

independence; low public trust in media integrity; lack of public expectations of fairness, accuracy, and balance; inadequate training; and the lingering adverse impacts of the Soviet model of journalism practice.

In addition, independent journalism along the lines of Western models is impaired by a broadly held societal view of the role of the media in comparatively new and developing countries. Instead of the independent watchdog role generally accepted in the West, ordinary citizens and governmental officials in the Caucasus and elsewhere in the former U.S.S.R. often assert that the press should serve as an agent of state-building and nationalism; its principal duty is owed to the state, not to the public. This reflects a belief among many citizens that the press should not be fully free to criticize government policies, including policies concerning religious rights.

Press constraints in all three countries have drawn international criticism, as illustrated by the following summaries based on reports for the study year, from the U.S. State Department, Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House, and OSCE:

Armenia

While independent media are active and allowed to express their views without restriction, all newspapers depend on economic or political patronage to some degree, and many journalists practice self-censorship. Broadcast stations encounter more economic pressure than overt political pressure, and advertising revenue influences programming. Journalists have reported harassment and intimidation, both during the study year and later. For example, the editor-in-chief of opposition daily *Zhamanak Yerevan* was jailed in July 2006 on allegations of forging documents to avoid military service, but press rights advocates contend that the arrest came in retaliation for critical coverage of the government, including the prosecutor general's office.

Azerbaijan

Although there has been a great deal of pluralism in the print media and a decline in defamation and libel suits due to intervention by domestic and international NGOs, the broadcast media generally follows a pro-government agenda, and a number of independent newspapers have lost circulation and reduced the frequen-

cy of publication. During the study period, opposition newspaper *Yeni Musavat* temporarily suspended publication after a court assessed $160,000 in libel damages. Journalists are subjected to violence, detention, and harassment. For example, the editor of the independent news magazine *Monitor* was murdered—a crime some human rights activists say was intended as a warning to critics of the government—and police beat independent and opposition journalists covering political rallies. The government maintained tight control over the National Broadcasting Council, which regulates the broadcast industry. There were complaints that authorities blocked domestic and foreign journalists from reporting fully on the fraud-tainted parliamentary elections of November 2005.

Georgia

Legislation in 2004 decriminalized defamation and allowed journalists to protect the identity of sources and to use hidden microphones, but self-censorship remains common. Broadcast outlets—unlike newspapers—generally avoid criticizing the regime. A popular television news show that often attacked government policy was cancelled. Journalists reported assaults, including one by a governor who beat a journalist after a televised debate. In 2005, two executives of independent television channel 202 were charged with extortion for allegedly taking cash not to air a show that would embarrass a member of parliament; both were convicted and sentenced to prison; an anchor for that station was beaten—actions that press rights defenders were retaliation for reporting critical of the government.

Forum 18 News Service

Forum 18, an Internet news service based in Norway, is a significant foreign provider of in-depth English-language coverage of religion-related news in the Caucasus and elsewhere in the former U.S.S.R. It was "an initiative of Christians in Norway keen to promote religious freedom for all" (Corley, 2007).

Its influence extends beyond its immediate readers. For instance, some of its stories are republished or followed up by other broadcast, print, and Internet media, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Eurasianet, and by religion-oriented Web sites.

It calls itself a "Christian initiative which is independent of any one church or religious group." Its board of directors consists

of Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians. According to Corley (2007), Forum 18 depends on "voluntary donations from individuals, trusts, and organizations. It has not received funds from any government. It does not charge anyone to receive its news," including other media or organizations that republish and redistribute its articles.

The mission statement explains:

Forum 18 is committed to Jesus Christ's command to do to others what you would have them do to you and so reports on threats and actions against the religious freedom of all people, regardless of their religious affiliation. Forum 18 believes that religious freedom is a fundamental human right, which is essential for the dignity of humanity and for true freedom. Forum 18 is committed to religious freedom for all on the basis of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

This may be summarised as: The right to believe, to worship and witness(;) The right to change one's belief or religion(;) The right to join together and express one's belief (www.forum18.org).

Forum 18 says it aims to encourage implementation of Article 18 by concentrating on "gross and open breaches of religious freedom, especially situations where the lives of individuals or groups are threatened and where the right to gather based upon belief is threatened." As to journalism values, it describes itself as "objective, presenting news in a deliberately calm and balanced fashion and presenting all sides of a situation. The overriding editorial objective ... is to as accurately as possible present the truth of a situation, both implicitly and explicitly." That statement is consistent with widely accepted Western standards for professional journalism.

Thus it professes to offer the type of coverage of religion in the Caucasus that is otherwise available on only a limited basis, if at all, from domestic or other foreign news services, and in a manner comporting with Western expectations for journalism.

In perception and reality, Forum 18 is more than a news service, however. Its journalists take on advocacy roles in promoting religious freedom beyond the ramifications of the stories they write. Religious rights activists say they depend on Forum 18's reporting. For example, at a hearing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission in Washington, counsel H. Knox Thames, said:

Forum 18 is one of the most well-respected news services in the world that focuses on threats and actions against religious freedom. F-18 reporters work diligently around the world to ensure that religious freedom violations are truthfully reported as quickly possible. As a person who follows religious freedom issues throughout the OSCE region, I have found Forum 18 to be an excellent and reliable source of information. Their work makes my job much easier" (U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2005).

Reflecting that reality, Forum 18 journalists have opted to make news by giving interviews and voluntarily participating in events covered by other media. During the study period, the editor and assistant editor were featured speakers at the same U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing where Thames commended their work, and they participated in a roundtable sponsored by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Also during the study year, IRIN News interviewed the editor, Corley, who was also the primary reporter covering the Caucasus, about religious constraints in Turkmenistan.

Hypotheses and Research Question

Given the paucity of coverage of religion-related events and policies in the Caucasus by mainstream Western press organizations and other Internet news services, Forum 18 supplies a steady flow of news and analysis about such developments. This study examines the type and content of that coverage, as well as some news-writing conventions of its articles.

Professional journalists exercise editorial judgment to determine what news to cover and what resources, such as staff time and expenses, to allocate to that coverage. Editorial judgment is a craft, not a science; thus decisions about coverage and play usually weigh a variety of newsworthiness factors such as timeliness, proximity, impact and consequence, conflict or controversy, celebrity involvement or prominence, novelty, uniqueness, human interest, and competition (Brooks et al, 2005; Fedler et al., 2005).

Such decisions also factor in the interests of that news organization's own audience. By self-definition, Forum 18's readers are interested in religion-related news in former Soviet republics. Beyond that, it is logical to assume that most of readers who choose a Christian-oriented news service as a source of information hold Christian beliefs. It is logical to also assume that Forum 18 coverage of the Caucasus will devote considerable attention to Christianity, given its self-description as a "Christian initiative." In addition, news coverage in general, regardless of topic, tends to be episodic, meaning journalists principally cover events and series of events—"hot" or breaking news—rather than producing more analytical pieces about, for example, government laws and policies. Thus:

H1: The majority of Forum 18 stories will cover news directly affecting Christianity and Christian sects rather than other religions, even in stories about predominantly Muslim Azerbaijan.

H2: The majority of Forum 18 stories from the Caucasus will primarily concern individual incidents and events rather than broad governmental laws and policies.

Forum 18 self-identifies as a Christian-affiliated news service committed to furthering religious freedom, not merely reporting about religion. Such reporting and advocacy may be antithetical to the perceived self-interests of officials and regimes that are committed to restricting both information and religious freedom. Governmental officials and public employees quoted by foreign news organizations may face repercussions from their superiors and higher-level authorities. (Freedman, 2005a, 2005b). Under such circumstances, it is likely that religion practitioners and religious rights advocates will be more willing than public officials to be interviewed and quoted by a Forum 18 journalist. That leads to:

H3: The majority of Forum 18 stories about the Caucasus will not include comments, statements, or quotes from named or unnamed official governmental sources but will include comments,

statements, or quotes from named or unnamed religiously affiliated sources, such as members of the clergy.

Western journalists are taught the importance of fairness and balance in reporting on public affairs and controversies. Fairness reflects the inclusion of multiple and often conflicting viewpoints in individual stories and in ongoing coverage. Balance, in part, concerns content treatment, such as space and prominence given to each side of a controversy. The prominence of one side over another also has implications for media fairness, and placement of a quotation—how high it appears in a story—affects the prominence of the quoted sources (Fico, Freedman, and Love, 2006; Carter, Fico, and McCabe, 2002). Given the pro-religious rights orientation of Forum 18:

H4: In stories that include both religiously affiliated and official governmental sources, religiously affiliated sources will be used more prominently, meaning their first assertion will appear higher in a story than the first assertion of an official governmental source.

There has been intensive press attention to alleged or verified relationships between Islamic fundamentalism and violence and terrorism. Press accounts of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, subsequent terrorist bombings in the United Kingdom, Spain, and France, and arrests and detentions of suspected terrorists who are Muslims frequently appear in the media. That type of coverage reinforces a psychological link in the minds of audiences and readers between Islam as a religion and violence as a tool of terror. Because Forum 18 reports on Islam in the Caucasus from a Western perspective:

H5: A significant proportion of Forum 18 stories about the Caucasus will include the words "terrorist," "terrorism," "fundamentalist," "fundamentalism" and/or "violence."

Finally, the use of unnamed sources, although discouraged by Western professional standards, is more commonplace in news coverage under authoritarian regimes. That is especially true for non-governmental sources interviewed about religion, individual rights, and other politically sensitive topics (Freedman and Walton, 2006). Such sources frequently ask not to be identified by name from fear of retaliation, usually at the hands of government. Given that Forum 18 stories about the Caucasus focus on the sensitive topic of religious freedom:

RQ: How do Forum 18 news stories use unidentified sources?

Method

This study content analyzed all 34 relevant articles posted in 2005 on Forum 18. Only regular news articles, including features and in-depth reports, were included; editorials and opinion columns were excluded. Two coders conducted the coding and intercoder reliability testing. Articles were randomly selected for testing, which yielded agreements ranging from 85 to 100 percent, using Scott's pi for categorical variables, Spearman's R for ordinal variables, and Pearson's R for continuous variables. The unit of analysis was an individual story.

Country was classified as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, or Nagorno-Karabakh because Forum 18 labels its coverage of Nagolrno-Karabakh separately from that of the two countries that claim the disputed territory.

Primary religion was classified into religions or sects, with an additional "other" category for stories that were not primarily about a specific religion. Twelve of those are Christian, including a "generally Christian" category when no denomination or sect was identified; the remaining categories are Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hare Krishna, and there is a "no primary religion" category (Table 2). A religion that received secondary or only a passing mention in a story was not coded as primary. To test H1, this categorical variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable, where 1= non-Christian and 2=Christian.

Primary story topic was determined by reading the entire article. The study operationalized it as a dichotomous variable—individual event/incident and broad policies or laws. The former refers to coverage of discrete event; the latter includes stories about legislation, governmental edicts, trends, and regulations. Event-centric coverage included stories about issues or governmental policies. This variable was used to test H2, which predicts that most stories will primarily concern individual events rather than broad laws and policies.

News sources are people to whom an article attributes information. Sources must be linked to assertions by verbs denoting speaking, such as "said" or `argued' and/or state of mind, such as "think" or "feel," or by phrases such as "according to" or "in a statement." Sources can be identified or unidentified. Identified—named—sources are those whose actual first and last names are disclosed; identified sources exclude organizations and agencies that make

assertions, such as "the police say." Assertions can be taken from formal statements, press releases, speeches, interviews with a Forum 18 reporter, or interviews with other media organizations.

Unidentified sources are individuals who make statements with less than a full name: a pseudonym, partial name, or no name, but with a specific and individualized description, such as "an observer" or "military analyst," or "church member."

This study examined only news sources identified and used individually; sources expressing opinions as a collective group were excluded. For instance, while "a church member says" was coded as an unidentified source, "church members say" was not coded as an unidentified source because the authors could not determine how many people were interviewed. Also excluded were documentary sources such as a statute or report; however, the person discussing or describing a document was coded as a named or unnamed source.

Sources fit either of two categories: governmental or religiously affiliated. The former includes national and local officials such as legislators, cabinet ministers, police officials, judges, prosecutors, and mayors. Religiously affiliated sources include members of the clergy; representatives of religions or religious rights organizations; and individual adherents.

Examination of the use of official and religiously affiliated sources help test H3, which posits that comments, statements, or quotes from religiously affiliated sources are more likely to be included than those from governmental officials. To test this hypothesis, the authors created a new interval variable (use of governmental sources/use of religiously affiliated sources) from the original two dichotomous variables for the two types of sources. Thus, if the ratio for a story equaled .5, that story uses only official sources; if the ratio equaled 2, only religiously affiliated sources are cited; if the ratio equaled 1, both types of sources are used in a comparable manner—either both or neither appear.

First appearance of sources refers to the location of the first statement or comment by a source in the article. This ordinal variable was used to test H4, which addresses prominence of source use when both official and religious-affiliated sources appear. If the ratio for a story was less than 1, that story placed the first or only official source more prominently—higher—than the first religiously affiliated source; if the ratio was greater than 1, a religiously affili-

ated source was more prominent than any official source; if the ratio equalled1, both types of sources were used in an equal manner—both types of sources first appear in the same paragraph.

Use of three groups of words—the appearance of "terrorism," "terrorism," "violence," "fundamentalism" and "fundamentalist"—was determined by reading the entire article. These variables were combined into one variable to test H5, which posits that a significant proportion of stories will use those words

Because the data came from a population, researchers used descriptive rather than inferential statistics to test the hypotheses; simple frequency tests were employed.

Results

H1, which posited that the majority of stories about the Caucasus will focus on Christianity, is supported (Tables 2 and 3). Only 12 percent of stories concerned non-Christian religions; all of those dealt with Islam, such as an October 2005 article about an appeal to release the arrested imam of a Sunni Muslim mosque in Gyanja, Azerbaijan.

Table 2
Primary religion in Forum 18 stories posted in 2005

Non-Christian	
Religion	Number of Stories
Islam	3
Hare Krishna	0
Judaism	0
Buddhism	0
	3
Christian	
Christianity generally	7
Baptist	5
Jehovah's Witness	15
Pentecostal	1
Armenian Apostolic	1
Protestant generally	1
Orthodox	0
Roman Catholic	0
Seventh Day Adventist	0
Methodist	0
Lutheran	0
Mormonism	0
	30
Other	
No primary religion	1
	1
N=34	

Table 3

Simple frequency tests outcomes for the hypotheses

Hypothesis	Variable	# of Cases	Percent
H1	Christianity	30	88.2
	Non-Christianity	4	11.8
H2	Individual event	14	41.2
	Overall policy	20	58.8
H3	Official sources used	4	11.8
	Religiously affiliated sources used	7	20.6
	Both used or unused	23	67.6
H4	Official sources being used more prominent	6	26.1
	Religiously affiliated sources being used more prominent	16	69.6
	Both used equally prominent	1	4.3
H5	Key words used	8	23.6
	Key words unused	26	76.4

H2, which asserts that the majority of stories will principally report on discrete incidents and events is not supported (Table 3). The percentage (41.2) for coverage of an individual event or incident is lower than the percentage (58.8) for articles about broader governmental laws and policies.

Also unsupported is H3, which suggests that stories are more apt to cite religiously affiliated sources than governmental sources (Table 3). The percentage (11.8) for official sources is nearly twice as high as for religiously affiliated sources (20.6). However, two-thirds of the stories cited both types of sources; for example, that occurred in a story about a Baptist in Nagorno-Karabakh who faced prison or forced labor for refusing on religious grounds to take the military oath; the sources included fellow Baptists and a Foreign Ministry official (Corley, 20 May 2005).

However, H4 is supported (Table 3) because the percentage (69.6) of stories in which religiously affiliated sources appear more prominently is greater than the percentage (26.1) of stories in which official sources receive more prominence. In only one story did both types of sources make their first appearance in the same paragraph, thus receiving equal prominence.

H5, was not supported. It predicted that such words as "terrorism," "terrorist," "fundamentalist," "fundamentalism" and "violence" will appear in a significant proportion of stories. The analysis found (Table 3) that fewer than a quarter of the stories incorporated at least one key words. Only eight stories used any of those key words. Two headlines included one of those key words: "Georgia: How Should Religious Violence Legacy Be Overcome" (Corley, 27 January 2005) and "Georgia: Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced—but What About the Others?" (Corley, 1 February 2005); however, headlines on 14 January and 25 May, 2005, stories used the violence-related but non-key word "mobs" in reference to attacks on religious minorities.

Finally, the study found that unnamed officials and religiously related sources did appear in Forum 18 stories, as RQ1 asked. The appearance of unidentified sources was expected in light of the understandable reluctance of non-governmental sources living under authoritarian regimes to be quoted by name about controversial issues including religious rights (Freedman and Walton, 2006; Freedman 2005a, 2005b; Bickler et al., 2004). That is especially true for interviews with non-state foreign media, such as Forum 18.

Notably, only one story incorporated unnamed official and religiously related sources. Among the other ten stories with unnamed sources, only unnamed officials appeared in three stories and only unnamed religiously related sources appeared in seven stories. Also significantly, only one story cited more than one unnamed source. Forum 18's use of unnamed sources contrasts with findings in a study of coverage of religious news by Western Internet news organizations in Central Asia. There, Freedman and Walton (2006) found that a majority of stories by Eurasianet, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and IRIN News cited at least one unnamed source; religious practitioners and "ordinary" people accounted for almost half the unnamed sources used.

Implications and Future Research

This study explored how a single non-Caucasus news organization covers a controversial and sensitive topic —religion—involving culture, history, human rights, politics, national identity, and ethnic relationships in the three disparate countries of the Caucasus. It examined questions of editorial judgment, sourcing, and word choice by the foreign journalists reporting and editing such stories.

Whether religion and religious rights issues in the Caucasus receive press coverage outside the region and how the media communicates that news may have serious public policy ramifications. As Ovsiovitch (1993) pointed out, human rights reporting can document violations and educate the public which, in turn, may lobby and motivate legislators and policymakers to act; coverage can also help correct shortcomings of international NGOs. Even more broadly, the public relies on the media for information about international affairs, and exposure to international news may significantly shape public attitudes toward other countries (Brewer et al., 2003).

Forum 18 stories have limited direct readership in the Caucasus, partly because its stories are posted only in English, but also because the Web remains inaccessible—physically, technologically, and financially—to many residents. Understandably, authoritarian regimes regard the Internet as imperiling their control over the flow of information and as a potential tool for opponents and critics, internal and external.

Residents who do access Forum 18 are apt to be better educated, more influential, and, perhaps, leaders or potential leaders in government, business, academia, mass media, or NGOs. The fact that Forum 18 articles may be picked up and redistributed by other media or cited in those organizations' own stories and distributed in English, Russian, or national languages provides additional exposure in and beyond the region.

Thus the implications of this study principally concern: the role and importance of Forum 18 as a disseminator of religion-related news about the Caucasus to other parts of the world; its ability to report on news that is otherwise not covered by other media; the degree to which readers regard its coverage as fair, balanced, and accurate; its influence on other media; and the influence its stories may have on foreign policies and public opinions about

Caucasus regimes, civil societies, and respect for individual rights. Those implications are largely unquantifiable, although anecdotal evidence or case studies may provide insights. To help assess impact, researchers could track the frequency with which Forum 18 stories are redistributed or cited by other media; that might provide a proxy for assessing its influence on other news organizations. It would also be useful to explore how often and in what context its stories are cited by governmental and transnational organizations, such as the U.S. Helsinki Commission and OSCE, and by NGOs concerned with religious, human, and press rights; again, that would provide one indicator of its impact on foreign policies and public opinion outside the region.

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