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Rethinking Press Freedom in Transitional Media Systems: Encoding Ideology and Negotiating Consent in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Uzbekistan's post-2016 media reforms have expanded digital journalism and private media while preserving significant mechanisms of state influence, challenging comparative media-system theories developed primarily within Western democratic contexts. This study examines how ideology is discursively produced, negotiated, and reproduced within Uzbekistan's transitional media system and asks how media liberalisation can coexist with continued structures of political influence. Drawing on critical media and communication theory and discourse analysis, the research investigates how structural and discursive practices shape media narratives beyond overt censorship. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the study analyses a longitudinal corpus (2016–2026) comprising presidential speeches and fifty news texts from state media (UzA and Yuz.uz), private online outlets (Gazeta.uz and Kun.uz), and Telegram channels across six policy domains. The findings reveal systematic differences in ideological encoding: state media legitimise official narratives through presupposition, certainty modality, and representations of reform as inevitable, while independent outlets create limited spaces for negotiated meaning through critical framing, multi-source attribution, and selective distancing from official discourse. The analysis identifies self-censorship as a professional adaptation through which structural pressures reshape journalistic roles and sustain consent without overt repression. Based on these findings, the study proposes a State Consent Model characterised by selective liberalisation, institutionalised self-censorship, and discursive consent production. The model extends comparative media-system theory and offers a framework for examining other transitional and hybrid media environments, amid growing global concerns over media backsliding.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Freedom Of Expression; Hybrid Media Systems; Media Reform; Self-Censorship