

# EBBING & FLOWING

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EURASIANET | BY JUSTIN BURKE

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hen Eurasianet started up in mid-1999, Vladimir Putin was a nobody, and democratization was ascendent in Eurasia. These days, I sometimes catch myself shaking my head in disbelief over how much has changed since—no one back then could have imagined that space-time could bend in such ways as to make facts relative.

Eurasianet, and watchdog journalism in general, has experienced plenty of convulsions over the past two-plus decades.

Coming to terms with all the uncertainty hasn't been easy. When we launched, we sailed with the weather gauge. But now it often feels like we're rowing upstream against the flow, expending lots of energy to make moderate progress.

Like so many things, Eurasianet's founding was the by-product of circumstances, not design. In early 1999, I believed my journalism career was over: I had left my job as a foreign correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* four years earlier and had been overseeing

publications about refugees and migration at the Open Society Institute, now the Open Society Foundations. But suddenly my department was shut down, and a colleague asked me to develop a web-based news platform covering Eurasia, mainly the Caucasus and Central Asia's 'stans.

This was still the pre-Google age, so the internet was generally looked down upon by journalists as a poor cousin of print mass media.

But I embraced the task of building what became Eurasianet. It kept me closely involved in covering Eurasia, a region I had spent most of my college years and professional career trying to understand.

I remember talking to some old journalist friends in those early days; they'd ask what I was doing, and I would tell them I ran a news website.

They would invariably look at me benignly and try to say something kind, when it was clear they thought I'd been relegated from the Premier League directly to the fourth division. (A few years later, when the digital revolution started pushing print to the brink, some of those same friends would be inquiring

whether there were any job openings at Eurasianet.)

Eurasianet is built on the journalistic principles that I practiced as a young reporter for the *Associated Press* and with the *Monitor*: you only report verifiable information; and you ground analysis in available evidence, not conjecture.

As a Moscow correspondent for the *Monitor* in the early 1990s, I had the chance to visit all 15 formerly Soviet republics. I was able to explore many of the Soviet

*Opposite page:* Justin Burke in St. Petersburg during a study abroad program, 1985.

*Right:* Burke in front of a train car on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, 1996.

Union's nooks and crannies, experiencing everything from a blizzard in late May during the midnight sun in Murmansk to watching on a frigid February afternoon a shaman's healing ceremony, performed in his izba reachable only by driving 20 kilometers from Yakutsk on the frozen Lena River. Such experiences reinforced in me a conviction that to capture a genuine sense of what it is going on in a country or region, you've got to travel. That's why Eurasianet has always relied on writers who live in the region.

Our breakthrough moment is connected to an indelible tragedy—9/11. In the wake of the attacks, lots of people knew nothing about the region that Osama bin Laden and other radical Islamic movements had used as their base of operations. Eurasianet was one of the few outlets back then capable of providing readers with a solid understanding of Central Asia, including Afghanistan.

We couldn't know it at the time, but 9/11 was also the high-water mark for the democratization process in Eurasia. The so-called war on terror prompted the United States and European Union to alter their policy priorities: national security considerations overrode everything else. Regional leaders were quick to pick up on this and began to methodically throttle all forms of opposition. It was an open door for kleptocratic behavior.

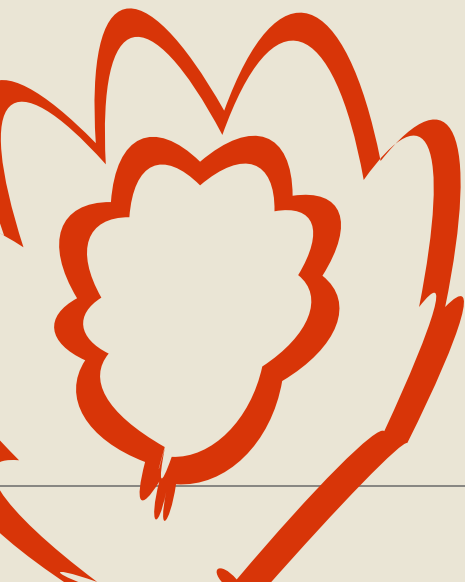
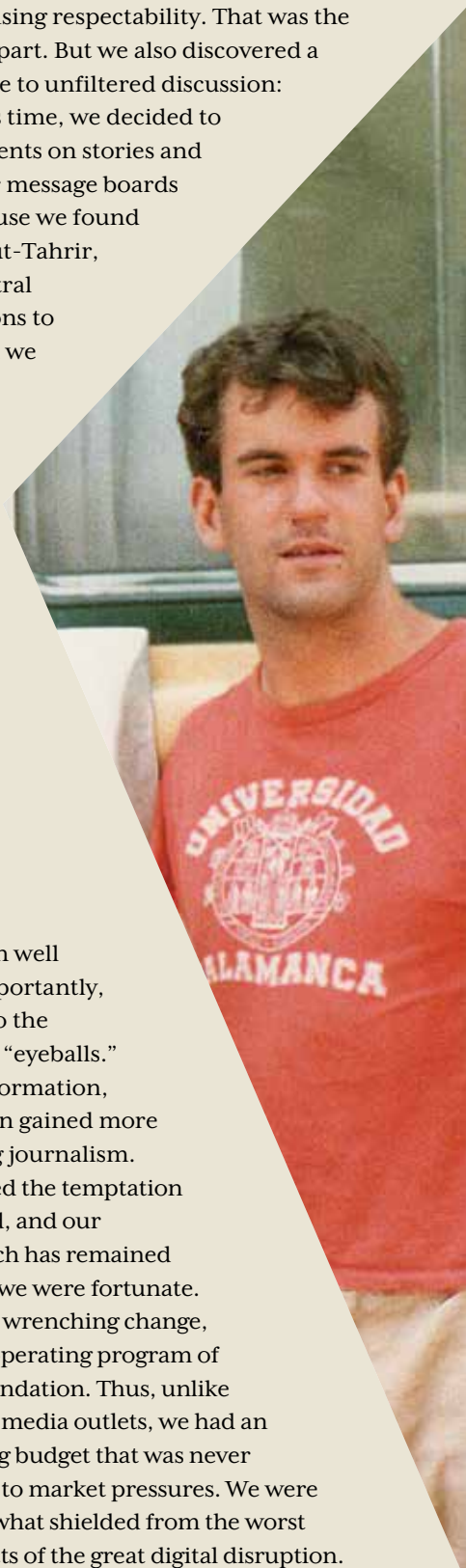
The start of this century also saw the dawn of social media—at first a boon, but now more of a bane. As readership across the internet grew, Eurasianet experienced rapid growth, and we basked in the glow

of rising respectability. That was the good part. But we also discovered a downside to unfiltered discussion: around this time, we decided to disable comments on stories and to shut down our message boards entirely. Why? Because we found that followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir, and other radicals in Central Asia, kept hijacking discussions to spread controversial views, and we lacked the resources to moderate the comments.

It's an old adage that it's much easier to tear down than to build. This saying is relevant for social media. It has given everyone a voice, which is great in principle. But in practice, at least in Eurasia, it has enabled a new form of authoritarianism. Illiberal actors have proven all too savvy in weaponizing social media, using it to trump advocates of openness and opportunity.

Social media's effect on fact-based journalism has also been devastating. The impact on advertising revenue has been well documented. But more importantly, its rise unleashed a race to the bottom in the search for "eyeballs." Misinformation, disinformation, and trivial information gained more value than watchdog journalism.

Eurasianet resisted the temptation to follow the trend, and our editorial approach has remained consistent. But we were fortunate. At this time of wrenching change, we were an operating program of a major foundation. Thus, unlike for-profit media outlets, we had an operating budget that was never subject to market pressures. We were somewhat shielded from the worst effects of the great digital disruption.



From a coverage standpoint, Eurasianet experienced some big moments in the early aughts. The color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 raised hopes for the rule of law. But the optimism proved fleeting, dulled by the Uzbek crackdown in Andijan in 2005 and Russia's knee-capping of Georgia in 2008. This century's second decade was a tough time for Eurasianet. General reader interest in Eurasia waned a bit as the U.S. war on terror lost its way. More

importantly, authoritarian leaders across the region developed new methods for turning the screws on independent media and NGOs. By 2015, Open Society Foundations (OSF) was declared "undesirable" in Russia; and Eurasianet, due to its association with OSF, was viewed with suspicion by virtually every government in the region. The only solution was independence. Eurasianet "spun off" from OSF and became a stand-alone, nonprofit news organization in 2016. Shortly thereafter, we

Left: Burke at the Berlin Wall, 1990.



EURASIANET PUBLISHED SOME OF THE FIRST REPORTING ON CHINA'S BURGEONING CRACKDOWN ON MUSLIM MINORITIES IN XINJIANG, BASED ON RESEARCH AND INFORMATION FROM HARRIMAN SCHOLARS.



entered into a hosting agreement with the Harriman Institute. The relationship provided needed ballast for our transition. It also provided Harriman with a means to accelerate the spread of academic expertise to the general reading public. Eurasianet, for example, published some of the first reporting in early 2018 on China's burgeoning crackdown on Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, based on research and information from Harriman scholars.

Spinning off was not difficult editorially speaking. The business side was another matter. Eurasianet had a great team of editors and writers, but no one had much experience with fundraising or managing cash flows. It was a steep learning curve.

The last few years have been challenging to say the least.

Grappling with the spamming of the public discourse by alternative facts often seems like a Sisyphean task.

And let's not get into the nightmare of COVID-19.

While stock in fact-based reporting may now be approaching an all-time low, I remain hopeful, even confident, of a rebound. I

often remind myself of the time back in August 1991, when I was on Lubyanka Square and witnessed the dismantling of Felix Dzerzhinsky's massive statue amid the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. I admit when the statue was ripped from its plinth and started swaying from the crane's steel cable, I cheered as if my team had just won the World Series with a home run in the bottom of the ninth. I completely bought into the end-of-history myth: Cold War over; democracy wins!

Of course, it was naive to believe that. Subsequent events have shown there is no final tide—that history constantly ebbs and flows. But this realization is now buoying for those like us who are waiting for a fresh wind to fill the sails of watchdog journalism. ■

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