

## **Information Vacuum**

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Self-censorship, low wages and poor technical resources are destroying independent journalism in Karakalpakstan.

On the face of it, journalists in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, are in an enviable position. The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and a series of laws ostensibly protect journalists going about their professional business.

But such legal safeguards are illusory. Unwritten laws, dictated by those wielding power and influence, impose a crippling regime of self-censorship on the republic's media.

The demise of the Aral Sea has spawned chronic economic and environmental problems. Traditional trades and industries have fallen into a massive decline. Local people endure high unemployment, poverty and ill health. Karakalpakstan is the only region of Uzbekistan to receive subsidies from Tashkent.

Yet reading Karakalpakstan's press, you'd get very little idea anything was wrong. The republic's problems are rarely reported. There are several reasons for this.

Critical articles risk provoking disputes with newspaper owners, existing and potential advertisers, and indeed anyone holding some financial leverage over the publication. Unfavourable coverage of political leaders would not only result in the journalist's head rolling, but that of the editor too.

A journalist attempting to write objectively and impartially would effectively jeopardise his career. As one reporter said, "You don't bite the hand that feeds you." Not that journalists are fed particularly well - monthly incomes rarely exceed \$10, well below what is needed to support a family.

The need to supplement their poor salaries forces many journalists to adopt unethical practices. One ruse, common to Uzbekistan as a whole, is to visit a rural area and write a glowing report, for a "small fee", on the local managers and political leaders. Alternatively journalists can be bought off, paid to keep damaging stories under wraps.

The prestige of the journalistic profession in Karakalpakstan has plummeted as a result. No one trusts newspapers or television reports anymore.

Poverty is such that people can think of better things to spend their pennies on than a four-page newspaper peddling a mixture of official information from Tashkent and local news, bearing little or no relation to their daily reality.

The media is silent on a whole swathe of pressing issues - the long delays in paying wages, poor living standards, ill-health among women and children, foreign news of almost any kind, the closure of schools during cotton harvest, the overarching power of local authorities.

Journalists' non-confrontational approach to their work is compounded by a lack of information. Newspaper offices are invariably low-tech operations, with few computers and virtually no access to the Internet.

Self-censorship, low wages and poor technical resources have so undermined journalism in Karakalpakstan that it is fair to say there are no quality or topical publications currently in circulation.

"It's convenient for the leadership of the country to have such a press," said one local reporter. "Journalists keep quiet on the most vital issues in the republic and that silence creates an information vacuum within which it's easier to manipulate and manage people."

Sadly, it's only through the writings of visiting foreign journalists, which find their way back into the republic, that people here find out what is happening on their own doorstep.

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**Location:** [Uzbekistan](#)

**Focus:** [Central Asia](#)

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