

UZBEKISTAN: ETHIC MEANS LITTLE WITHOUT FREEDOM

By Karim Bakhriev, Internews, Uzbekistan

Attempts at creating any independent organization of journalists, that could unite the writing community and formulate general rules of journalistic ethics, have so far been nipped in the bud in Uzbekistan.

Disputes about the problems and prospects of journalists' professionalism do not cease even in countries with long-standing democratic traditions such as of freedom of speech. Every news event like, say, the death of Princess Diana, or the terrorist attacks in the US, provokes discussion about, and puts the question of journalists' professional ethics in the hot seat. (For example, questions such as how close can a reporter get to a person's private life, or how delicately should he interview the victims' relatives, or is it moral to let the terrorist leaders address

ethics. Admittedly it was a period of constant change and continuous, inconsistent, economic and social reforms. These conditions gave rise to the creation of new newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, with the era of so-called "market relations." "The founders of media organisations, editors and publishers alike, were first of all interested in the financial survival of their businesses," recalls Ruzibai Saidov, press secretary of Uzbekistan's Supreme Economic Court. "They created advertising offices and tried to survive under the con-

was paid to journalistic ethics. On the one hand the media had freed itself from the yoke of communist ideology and so-called "communist morality", and could write about everything in any way, but on the other hand it made no progress in forming its own moral code. The media began to serve the interests of "the authorities." People reading sensationalist articles or watching revelatory broadcasts used to ask "who ordered this?!" The so-called "black PR" appeared. However, where freedom still exists the media is going through an agonising process, trying to perceive its role in a democratic society.

ABSENCE OF MORALITY

In Uzbekistan, "the absence of morality" and the media's euphoria over freedom of speech did not continue for long. The media and journalists who had done much in the fight for the country's independence and the sovereignty of the nation became very quickly unwanted. The new authorities grew stronger, and by the middle of 1992 had restored censorship and established a new "morality" – the ideology "of national independence" (from democracy and the world order) – from which "a strict order for the sake of

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the public by way of TV or radio?) During the first few post-Soviet years, the mass media in all the newly independent states experienced a period of unprecedented freedom of speech. At the same time, however, their behaviour often verged on total immorality and openly defied any standards of social justice and

conditions of uncivilised competition and unpredictable inflation."

In the East there is the saying "A hungry person is not interested in the pattern on the plate his meal is served on." Of more interest is the size of the plate. It is obvious that in the course of radical transformations little attention

stability” and “traditional Uzbek reverence (veneration) and obedience to grown-ups (chiefs)” has developed, in the place of freedom of speech and political plurality. According to a governmental newspaper reporter, who wished to remain anonymous, “Now ‘the professional ethics’ of Uzbekistan’s journalists is based on lauding their own and others’ servility, as well as the “unmasking” of those who have been identified by the authorities. Those who report on the country’s problems will most likely be denounced as “enemies of the people not wishing to join in with the country’s real success.” Boundless rivers of praise will flood everywhere, and there will be no problems. I recollect a well-known aphorism: “Show me the nation that has no problems, and I’ll find a cranial trauma scar on it.”

LAW AND ETHIC

Basically, journalistic ethics and legislation interconnect, and in many countries journalists are taught the two as a single subject. In short, legislation defines the framework of “what to write”, that is the essence of the media, while ethics defines “how to write”, that is delicately and in a civilised way, expressively and objectively. Therefore, journalistic ethics is a self-adjusting journalistic area. In a country where there it is difficult to write about what one wishes, i.e. to disclose the truth, the question of how to write about “something wrong” is of little interest. No wonder, therefore, that polling results showed that few journalists think about journalistic ethics at all. It is obvious that

any crisis in the field of ethics has its own reasons caused by objective, political, legal, social, psychological and economic factors. Firstly, during the Soviet regime in Uzbekistan, as in the USSR, in each house there was a cheap loudspeaker, and unlike the highways and railways the propaganda network was perfectly organised. Almost every family used to subscribe to 4-5 newspapers and magazines. “Today, there are villages where not a single person subscribes to any newspaper,” said Urol Uzbek, a correspondent of the republican radio station *Mashjal*. “And now the re-transmitting radio network has also ceased to exist.” Though the state has formally allowed the creation of an independent media, in reality it is very weak. Today, pro-government television is the sole reporting media that covers the whole country, however many villages have no electricity supply because of non-payment. As to individual information facilities such as fax, the Internet and email, they are still at a rudimentary stage.

CHANGE OF IDEOLOGY

Although the “Marxist-Leninist ideology” has been replaced by a new monopoly – the “ideology of national independence” – and any departure from it is considered either “a lie”, “a defamation of independent Uzbekistan” or “an offence to the hardworking Uzbek people”, the propagation of this ideology has ceased due to the absence of communication links with the electorate. This has resulted in the stagnation of society’s information and communication systems, and damaged the

creation of any journalistic ethical rules.

Secondly, traditions and stereotypes that underlie the feudal backwardness of the relationship between the people and the authorities continue to dominate. If you were to believe them, then it is “impudent” to tell the truth about the authorities, that giving one’s own differing opinion to the approved-from-above ideology is considered “provocation,” and a person who speaks about the mistakes and problems of the reforms is denounced as “a troublemaker” and “an enemy of independence”. However, in Uzbek history there has been Boborakhim Mashrab, Mansur Khallozh, Chulpon, Usman Nasyr and others, who were hung, cut to pieces, or shot by the authorities of their day, but spoke the truth.

UNWANTED UNION

Thirdly, political and legal factors have caused the ethical crisis in Uzbek journalism. After gaining independence, unions of writers, composers, architects, artists and others were revived. In addition, new unions and associations, for example folk craftsmen, jewellers, lawyers, and bankers were created. The only unwanted union appeared to be the union of Uzbek journalists.

Attempts at creating any independent organisation of journalists, that could unite the writing community and formulate general rules of journalistic ethics, have so far been nipped in the bud. Corrupt officials object to the creation of ethical standards that could prevent the media’s need to manipulate its activities in favour of the authorities with the help of legislation.

Fourthly, during the period of “economic reforms”, the path and results of which are difficult to understand and discuss under conditions of severe censorship, the media has experienced a period of intense struggle for survival, thus neglecting journalistic ethical standards. Instead of searching for information, journalists are searching for money. Almost all TV and radio broadcasts are “sponsored”, that is a certain organisation transfers some money to a media enterprise’s account (or simply pays in cash), and there is then broadcast a congratulatory piece about the organisation’s activities “for the benefit of the native land and people.” As the saying goes, ‘money brings no happiness, but hardens the nervous system’. Gifts and dinner parties became the ordinary way to employ journalists, and nobody likes an unemployed journalist: “You may listen to me or not, but don’t stop me from lying.” Many ministries and departments have started their own press services. This should please journalists, but unlike the PR services in democratic

countries that represent their organisation and serve as a bridge between the media and the organisation, our press services have become brokers that are busy paying off and intimidating journalists. They

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provide an additional income for journalists that please them and also provide them with government awards. “It is difficult to avoid temptation, when a journalist’s average salary is around 8-10 thousand soms (6-8 US dollars),” says Kanoat Baikhan, a correspondent with the *Mehrigiyo* newspaper. “Sometimes journalists bringing their articles to a newspaper invite the editor to dinner, or give him gifts instead of asking for a fee”, no

doubt because someone has already paid for the article.

NO RULE OF LAW

It is obvious that it is difficult to talk about ethical standards under conditions of censorship that are contrary to clause 67 of the Uzbekistan Constitution. When the authorities themselves do not respect the Constitution and legislation, how can we expect this of others? Ethical standards that limit abuses of power are necessary for those who enjoy freedom of speech. In Uzbekistan there is no abuse of freedom of speech because there is no freedom of speech to begin with. Ethical standards warn of mistakes, however in order to make mistakes, one has to make something. An Uzbek journalist does not need any ethical standards. As it is said, ‘Had he wings, they would prevent him from crawling.’ It would be ridiculous if it were not so sad. Thus it has turned out to be a gloomy... obituary. At the same time, speaking the truth is the principal obligation of any person out of respect to other people and society.