



Media Ethics – The World Perspective

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Abstract

Deep and continuing erosion in the standards of journalistic practice is becoming a universal cause of concern not only for the credibility of the media itself but for the future of democracy all over the world. The problem is not new but the awful dimensions it has assumed in the era of economic globalization and crass commercialism is threatening the very foundation of ethical journalism. This brings into question the legitimacy of the media as the fourth pillar of state and the mainstay of democracy. If the trend persists, media will cease to be trusted as a potent instrument of public good. It was with this distressing realization that this kind of journalism had caused the profession enough grievous loss of public trust and credibility that the first press codes were evolved in the 1920s. The television introduced disturbing new trends in the news media. The scope for harm and hurt of the public interest was extremely limited in the past because there was no satellite communication, no cable TV networks, no globalization of the cultural products, no mega corporations occupying the entire communication space including newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, satellite, films, book publishing, music and entertainment industries; no digitization of media operations and no Frankenstein of the Internet. But, even in that situation, several surveys and studies commissioned by different bodies since the 1980s have more or less repeatedly confirmed that the public is distrustful of the performance or the attitude of the press, more so of the electronic media. One highly reliable study found that three-fourths of all adults have some problem with the credibility of the media and one-fifth of them deeply distrust the news media. "Many people feel that the press is a self-serving, powerful and frightening institution", it said. Things have since become worse. The communication function of the press is being unashamedly subordinated to its profit-making practices. Wanton intrusion by the commercial interests in the newsroom decisions is no longer a guarded secret. Cases of such glaring lack of professionalism and illegality have been taken to the Press Council in India which has unreservedly condemned these practices. The only choice before the press is to strengthen the

mechanism of self-regulation to ensure accountability. Walter Lipmann had rightly said that institutions are destroyed not by invaders from outside but by weakening their foundations from within. A Media Council independent of any direct or indirect control or influence of the government or of any other external dispensation would be the most appropriate mechanism for media self-regulation. It will do media good to remember that its sincere commitment to remain accountable to the people is the best guarantee of its freedom, which the people, in turn, will themselves vigorously defend. Lack of it is a sure pathway to destruction. And, the best way to ensure accountability is self-regulation. Let us strengthen it to strengthen freedom.

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1. Introduction

When the competitive yellow journalism perpetrated grave excesses through the Penny Press in the later parts of the nineteenth century in the United States of America their potential to do harm was still very limited as compared to the holocaust it can wrought today. The circulations, though large by contemporary standards, were confined to certain areas and affected comparatively small sections of the people.

And, yet public disenchantment with the conduct of the newspapers grew so deep and strong, and their credibility became such a grave matter of concern for the Press itself that one of its own main actors, Joseph Pulitzer felt impelled to warn the American newspapers that "a cynic, mercenary and demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself." A leading American press critic has recently observed that this admonition had guided news operations through most of the twentieth century but they started eroding since the 1970s.

The fact, however, is that this and other forms of degeneration of the Press had set in much earlier and had gone on for long. The situation was causing concern not only in America but in parts of Europe too. It was with this distressing realization that this kind of journalism had caused the profession enough grievous loss of public trust and credibility that the first press codes were evolved in the 1920s. The situation quite perceptibly improved thereafter, but only until the advent of the television in the 1950s.

The television introduced disturbing new trends in the news media. This was characterized by what the then Chairman of the United States Federal Communication Commission, Newton Minow told the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961. Minow described the television programming as "a vast wasteland." He said, "I am here to uphold and protect the public interest but some say the public interest is what interests the public. I disagree." Obviously, what Minow was trying to tell the world was the media was serving interests other than the public interest.

However, the scope for harm and hurt of the public interest was as yet extremely limited because there was no satellite communication, no cable TV networks, no globalization of the cultural products, no mega corporations occupying the entire communication space including newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, satellite, films, book publishing, music and entertainment industries; no digitization of media operations and no Frankenstein of the Internet.

The subjects they dealt with were also softer. There was no horrendous problem of global terrorism, no great wars fought with the subtle help of the sophisticated media operations, techniques and gadgets, no determined attempt to use communication as an instrument of state power with a view to achieve carefully targeted results in the manner people would perceive them innocuous and harmless, if not benevolent; no embedded journalism, no cross-border and cross-country bigotry-driven violent attacks.

But, even in that situation, several surveys and studies

commissioned by different bodies since the 1980s have more or less repeatedly confirmed that the public is distrustful of the performance or the attitude of the press, more so of the electronic media. One highly reliable study found that three-fourths of all adults have some problem with the credibility of the media and one-fifth of them deeply distrust the news media. "Many people feel that the press is a self-serving, powerful and frightening institution", it said.

The survey concluded that "significant percentages of the people believe the press regularly invades the privacy of subjects, shows disrespect for standard news sources, is insensitive of the harm caused by reporting, over-dramatizes the news, tends to cover what supports the reporter's point of view, is not careful to separate fact from opinion, and often provides conflicting reports of the same story."

Another study showed that 57 percent of the newspaper readers "do not believe that newspapers in general are usually fair." Also, 42 percent of them feel their own newspapers attempt to manipulate them and 53 percent think that the press is too easily manipulated by others.

Things have since become worse. After a more recent survey a senior editor Bob Evan has said, "real people hate us, and we can't stand to be hated". I think it is a serious warning for journalists everywhere as, thanks to the universal march of the dubious Murdochian values, similar trends are fast engulfing the media in all parts of the world.

In his well-researched article "The Age of Murdoch", James Fallows has described media Moghul Rupert Murdoch as "a power-mad, rapacious right-wing vulgarian, who has indeed been relentless in building a one-of-kind media network that spans the world. "What really drives him, though, is not ideology but a cool concern for the bottom line and the belief that the media should be treated like any other business, not as a semi-sacred public trust....Rupert Murdoch has seen the future and it is him," says Fallow.

Murdoch is usually happy with whichever show on his Fox T.V. or headline in the New York Post or topless Page 3 model in The Sun draws a big audience, he adds. Andrew Heyward, a former head of the CBS News said, "Murdoch has been shameless about using his journalism for the advancement of his business interests."

What saddens here is the awful spectacle of a growing number of newspapers and media channels throughout the world adopting Murdoch and his not too honourable operations as a role model. This is already getting so very widely reflected in all media – newspapers, magazines, Web portals and electronic news channels. Much against the time-honoured ideal of public service which the press had cherished and nurtured throughout its history, crass commercialism and naked pursuit of bottom lines is its watchword today.

The communication function of the press is being unashamedly subordinated to its profit-making practices. Gandhiji had, perhaps, foreseen this situation long time ago when he observed: "When a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices."

While it must be accepted that no media can survive and remain independent without being economically viable, crass commercialism and consumerism cannot be allowed to be the order of the day, as it is so very evident today. With the truly independent editor becoming a rare species, the scenario in regard to a virtuous press is getting bleaker by the day.

Wanton intrusion by the commercial interests in the newsroom decisions is no longer a guarded secret. Newspaper owners, brand managers and advertising executives often participate in and even direct coverage and display of news and comments. Cases of such glaring lack of professionalism and illegality have been taken to the Press Council in India which has unreservedly condemned these practices.

Increasing public resentment against the performance of the Indian electronic media can be seen from what a concerned citizen Prof. Bhoomitra Dev, a former Vice-chancellor of three Indian universities, so painfully wrote in a leading English newspaper a couple of years ago, Prof. Dev said :

‘A neat comparison can be made between a deft surgery and some of the electronic media presentations, particularly covering a programme. While a good surgeon chooses a minimal incision, a channel may show the worst to grab maximal viewer- attention. While the first quickly stitches the wound, the latter may leave it open and for ever ‘unstitched.’ Lastly, a surgeon strives for quick healing of the wounds, while an electronic media may leave several festering sores for the social agony.’

Prof. Dev’s description cannot and must not be swept under the carpet as the opinion of a single individual. It is for everyone to see how large sections of the media are giving a go-by to the age-old values of the news. Truth is treated as expendable. Facts are not always considered sacred. Comments can be wholly unfounded, provocative or downright irresponsible.

Interpretation is not always considered to be meant only to give meaning, background and context, there is an uninhibited editorializing of the news with personal bias introduced both at the reportorial and editorial levels. Even headlines are some times manufactured with subjective perceptions and policy slants of journalists and proprietors.

Sources can remain wholly or partially unidentified. Damning verdicts of unreliability of a source can be passed in a story without offering any evidence to support it. ‘Reliable’ or ‘inside’ sources can be plain fabrication in respect of target organizations or individuals. Lines separating reporting and advertisement are fast vanishing, particularly in special sections on culture, fashion, lifestyle, travel, health, sports etc. News space is for sale Trivial, vulgar, offensive, de-humanizing and amoral stuff being dished out and indecent and stereotyped portrayal of women being done in both the print and electronic media is mocking at what Gandhiji had said to be one of the three objectives of journalism, namely rousing desirable sentiments among the people.

A new phenomenon of ‘attack journalism’ – a form of journalism now being regretted in the West–has been

introduced in Indian journalism. It involves picking out a target and send a reporter “to bring back the scalp” It is interesting to read a confession in this regard by a senior journalist who has been recently appointed ‘Public Editor’ of the New York Times. Daniel Okrent, the new Public Editor, wrote in his first fortnightly column in the New York Times of December 07, 2004: “Early in my magazine career, I at times participated in a form of attack journalism that today fills me with remorse...I got fairer, and better, as I got older.”

All this will eventually lead to self-destruction if not stemmed in time. Journalism will totally lose its credibility, and with it whatever trust it still enjoys with the people. This is a grave warning which the media- both print and electronic- must heed with alacrity, and act to reverse it with unflinching commitment. If it does not do it itself, public outcry will force the governments to act. That would be a sad day for the press and for nations.

While traditional norms of media ethics must remain eternally relevant, it must face the new challenges boldly and squarely. Truth, accuracy, objectivity, balance, lack of bias and prejudice, not to prejudge an issue or individual, avoiding suggestive guilt by association, impartiality, fair play, right to reply, promptly and prominently to make correction, maintaining confidences etc. – all these canons must never be ignored or diluted at any cost.

But, media must prepare itself with determination and uncompromising sense of purpose to address the new dimensions of its ethics in the fast emerging global scenario that is full pitfalls of a magnitude never heard of before.

The only choice before the press is to strengthen the mechanism of self-regulation to ensure accountability. Walter Lipmann had rightly said that institutions are destroyed not by invaders from outside but by weakening their foundations from within. The National News Council set up in the US in 1973 failed because the major American newspapers and TV networks did not cooperate with it.

They built an imaginary fear that it would create an atmosphere that might eventually lead to government regulation of the press. Nothing of the kind happened but the Council could not survive even for a decade because of lack of support from the leading sections of the media. Another reason, however, was that it proved too timid to fix and too tepid to criticize the wrong doers.

But, the need for such a body with adequate strength to do vigorous self-monitoring and deliver candid criticism is again being felt there. Voices have started being raised for it from within the intellectual community as well as some constituents of the media itself.

In the UK, the Press Council had to be turned into a Press Complaints Commission mainly because of the excesses of the tabloid press. The press had to accept this change in face of government’s threats of creating new offences which would effect its functioning. But, the need for a self-regulatory body of the press is still not denied there though a majority of citizens would like it to function more vigorously and effectively than

in the past.

Fortunately for us, the Indian Press Council is based on the best architecture in the world, ensuring complete independence from the government in its composition and power structure. The Council has, through its functioning, effectively belied the fear that a statutory body that it is, it would become a handmaid of the authorities.

And yet, regrettably, it is has allowed itself to be manipulated from within, calling into question its representative character without which it can command no respect or legitimacy either from the press or the people at large. The very same provisions of the Press Council Act which were meant to give the Council such a character, like preference for common nominations, have been misused to deny the most representative and respectable professional bodies like the National Union of Journalists (India), and at one time the Editors Guild of India, their representation in the Council. The Council can have no legitimacy and credibility without such bodies, particularly when these are known to have made immense contribution to its deliberations and decisions, and in lending prestige to it.

The ingress of certain not-so-deserving elements and unrepresentative organizations into the Council has further eroded its credibility. At least two such members had to be got rid of in the last Council. Non-cooperation and disregard of the Council by some big newspaper houses is another phenomenon of serious concern for the prestige and effectiveness of this institution. These questions need to be addressed urgently if the Council is to uphold and retain its moral authority and sanctions. The Council's representative character must be ensured when it is reconstituted.

In order to compel compliance of its directions, decisions and adjudications, the Council should be vested with powers of contempt of court. But, no punitive powers need to be conferred on it as that will erase the very rationale of the creation of a self-regulatory body of the press. Punitive powers for such a Council would be, to say the least, self-serving and self-destroying ultimately.

The Council must also put in place a really effective and rigorous mechanism for closely examining and monitoring of the performance of the press, particularly in view of the growing Murdochian practices in the country's media. Besides revamping the in-house machinery, if any, the Council should itself commission, and encourage others to conduct, independent and professional studies and surveys from time to time.

One way of self-regulation is that the professional bodies of journalists should themselves organize such studies in an impartial and unbiased manner. So should it be done by schools of journalism and communication, in different parts of country. But, Media self-regulation cannot be meaningful and complete in the present scenario when a number of electronic media channels are beaming news and comments 24 hours a day, unless radio and television news set-ups and journalists working in or in relation to them are also brought into its ambit. There is, indeed, a greater and more urgent need today for a really effective self-regulation of the electronic media.

A Broadcasting Council was envisaged in the Prasar Bharati Act for the public broadcaster Prasar Bharati, to hear complaints against its radio and TV programmes. But, it has not taken birth till this date. Then, a Broadcasting Bill had sought to spread a wider net by extending such mechanism to all broadcasters. But, that also lapsed never to be revived. Today, in the absence of any such body, it is the government which possesses all the powers to regulate the contents of broadcasting.

In my view, a Media Council independent of any direct or indirect control or influence of the government or of any other external dispensation would be the most appropriate mechanism for media self-regulation. The Media Council is necessary also to provide protection to the journalists working in the electronic media as is available to the print journalists through the Press Council.

But, any idea that there could be one public authority to deal with both the carriers of the airwaves and their journalistic contents, as is being hawked around in some corridors of power, would tantamount to regulation and not self-regulation. This would grossly violate the spirit of a free press and is, therefore, not acceptable in a democracy.

In the formation of a Media Council, it should be seen that the flaws found in the Press Council Act and the regulations framed under it do not recur in the functioning of the this body which may take the form an expanded Press Council with necessary changes and modifications.

In conclusion, it will do media good to remember that its sincere commitment to remain accountable to the people is the best guarantee of its freedom, which the people, in turn, will themselves vigorously defend. Lack of it is a sure pathway to destruction. And, the best way to ensure accountability is self-regulation. Let us strengthen it to strengthen freedom