



Professional Ethics v/s Market Considerations: The state of Contemporary Journalism

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Abstract:

Indian journalism has completed 230 years of existence. James Augustus Hicky started the Indian press and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Bala Gangadhar Tilak, Gopala Krishna Gokhale, Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and other stalwarts played a primary role in shaping the destiny of Indian Press. The contemporary Indian Press is under the control and ownership of dominant market forces. The convergence of media technologies has made the people to live in a global village. The communications media including the press wield tremendous power and shape the relations of power in the present Indian society. The market forces have reduced the status of Indian Press to that of an instrument of profit making at the cost of professional ethics and public interest. The present generation of newspapers is no more public trusts and the professional have become executives who are directed by market forces and economics of newspaper production.

Key words: Media ethics, profession, market forces, convergence.

Introduction

Journalism is basically a value based profession. The press is a full-fledged institution and all print media resources and services broadly constitute the gamut of 'journalism'. Bernard Shaw cautioned that honest education is dangerous to capitalist system which has ruled the roost all over the world economically and otherwise. An independent and responsible press can safeguard democracy and public interest according to several scholars including Gandhi. The first Royal commissions highlighted the relationship between journalism and democracy. The press in India has played a historic role in the national freedom movement and prepared grounds for the practice of value based journalism in the post-organization and contents are subjected to several changes which have affected professional excellence and integrity.

Role of Journalism in Society

Journalism is known as the fourth estate of democracy. Over the years, the press has become so powerful that it has acquired a place of pride in modern society as an effective 'opposition leader' outside the parliament. It is supposed to play a key role as the watch dog of public interest in the hill top. The press also has the responsibility to build the nation in accordance with the constitutional objectives and promote equality, fraternity, justice and collective welfare in a pluralistic society like India. The press has no important role to play in safeguarding public interest and national sovereignty.

The professional ethics are described as a set of moral principles or values which govern the conduct of journalism. The press has become so powerful that it has become an indispensable part of democracy and society. U.S. President Thomas Jefferson said: "if it were left to me to decide



whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter". The statement rightly reveals the press assumes great significance in society as the instrument of democracy and progress. The professionals are required to cultivate the habit of serving the people by considering journalism as a public utility service for the benefit of the society rather than looking at journalism as a business or profession meant for their own benefit.

Justice K.Jayachandra Reddy (2002) observes: "The freedom that the media enjoy is the freedom for and on behalf of the people. Media play the role of communicator and as such they have to inform and not to misinform, disinform or no-inform the people on issues of vital importance. They have to educate, motivate, persuade and entertain. They must have their fingers on the pulse of the people and they have the pious obligation not to jeopardize or harm the welfare of the people. As the fourth organ, the press has also the responsibility of building the nation. It can promote economic development, social justice and reforms bring about religious and communal harmony. It can aid and assist in implementing development programmes meant for alleviating poverty and for promoting health, education and literacy programmes".

Threats to Professional Ethics and Public interest

Nation builders like Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and others have emphasized that the journalists should uphold ethical norms and standards in discharging its duties and commenting on matters which bear on social justice, economic equity, political reformation,

cultural promotion and so on. The professionals are also called upon by the visionaries not to distort or exaggerate new and views which would jeopardize public interests in a pluralistic society like India.

The press in India is governed by the market forces. In the present times, increasing media pervasiveness has made journalism as a player in power structure in India and other countries. Instead of providing a platform for public debates and discussions, the press in India has become an ingredient of the power game. The words of veteran journalist B.G.Verghese (2006) aptly reveals the sorry state of affairs of press in india. It reads: "The newspaper industry has expanded there is much to celebrate on the occasion of newspaper day. The media today wields immense power, shaping the national agenda by what it writes or portraits, linking ever-growing communities in the continuing process of nation building and serving as a watchdog. The market has become more pervasive than government. In the competition for circulation / rating and a large share in the consumer rupee through advertising, there has been a dumbing down of serious reportage and analysis, a trivialization of news and events, sensationalism and prurient coverage, invasion of privacy, tribal by the press, resort to rumor, gossip and innuendo without verification and disregard for fair and balance reporting or prompt correction when in error and the right or reply. While there are admittedly fine journalists and some excellent writing, there is a lot of editorializing in the news, conjecture in place of fact and lazy journalism marked by shallow writing, inadequate research or patent ignorance of background and context. Two trends merit attention.



Editors have declined as market savvy proprietors and managers have taken over. Overall, editors have yielded to page editors even as entertainment, lifestyle, food and other sections jostle for space with serious news and analysis. Many chief editors spend a lot of time outside the office and have become brand managers.

Sundari and Bhavani (2008) comment on the state of the Indian press thus: "Newspapers are money making enterprises to their owners, thus consideration of social service or dedication, truth and justice are irrelevant to them. Suppression, distortion or falsifications of news lead to loss of hard work as well as the initiative for public good. Newspaper journalism is supposed to be the embodiment of self – sacrifice for public interest but this is a myth in the present situations. The declining standards of reportage in newspapers are proved in the empirical studies conducted in India over a period of time".

The contemporary Indian press reflects the dominance of market forces which are wedded to maintenance of statusquoism which has caused a death blow to democracy in the country. Human interest stories, business stories, political stories, film related stories and sport stories have gained an upper hand over development journalism, public service journalism, investigative journalism and other aspects of value – based journalism in the country. A new trend of sound bite journalism has emerged where in consequential statements take over substance and meaning. The contemporary press is doing great disservice to democracy in India. The number of newspapers and magazines is bound to increase since television and computer cannot be true

substitutes to print media from the point of view of advocacy journalism. In the age of online journalism, journalistic values have suffered the same erosion as larger professional and social values.

The media ethics are getting complex in the age of market forces which are mainly preoccupied with power-centered and profit-centered journalism. Many critics have complained that professional ethics have been replaced by new market terms and conditions which have affected journalism as a profession. Bhaskar Rao (2006) states: "Ethical foundation is what gives it a stature and strength for a societal role, particularly where credibility is the principal criterion as in the case of mass media. Ethical practice and norms distinguish rights from wrongs. In fact, an unfettered press, without ethical concerns, can be a threat to a free society and to its very independence. As ethical standards are constantly under question not just in India but also in the rest of the world, it is important for the profession that they are discussed and reiterated from time to time. With the emergence of the electronic media – television earlier and satellite broadcasting more recently – the media ethics is being viewed in a newer context and has become more complex as operational compulsions of the new media are different. That is why issues to do with media ethics require serious deliberation at various levels within and outside the profession. Even in a competitive scenario such values are derived either from market forces or from self - imposed standards and codes evolved over the years by the players themselves as in the case of the press. Even a regulatory mechanism by the state does not reduce the relevance of media ethics".



In India, ethical dimensions of press are losing their relevance in view of the growing corporationalisation of the media which has caused certain shifts in the paradigm of media operations. The declining ethical standard of journalism has caused considerable damage to the constitutional values such as social justice, economic equity, collective welfare and national sovereignty. The market forces are shaping the political sphere in India because of their inherent characteristics. In the age of television boom in general and convergence of media technology in particular media ethics is becoming increasingly complex. Market forces and commercialization of press have brought about the decline of journalistic ethics in India. The present generation is facing this complexity, both in the case of news channels and newspapers. The mix-up of interests of media corporate with those of the editorial services has brought about the downfall of professional standards.

Conclusion

The relationship between professional ethics and power relations is widely discussed in modern society. The professional organizations have a great responsibility to minimize the scope for the declining professional ethics in journalism. The educational system, civil society, professional bodies, law enforcement agencies and research bodies are required to facilitate healthy debates and discussions on media ethics. The role and impact of media on society and democracy need to be discussed at length in the present competitive scenario. Media watch groups should consist of veteran journalists, legal experts, professionals, activists and others concerned with professional standard of journalism. The schools of journalism are required facilitates

meaningful discussions and deliberations which would go a long way in preparing grounds for institutionalization of professionalism as far as Indian journalism is concerned.

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