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Paper No. 6

ETHICAL DILLEMMAS:
TRENDS AND EMERGING ISSUES

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The preparation for this paper is based on the assumption that notwithstanding the serious and laudable efforts to forge a regional identity, the member countries of this block are different. They are different in terms of the social, political, economic and religious institutions that govern the daily life of their citizens.

Yet, a series of attempts have been made in the past to arrive at a common approach to media related issues. These attempts have culminated in formulating a media agenda for South Asia 1995-2000. The agenda was arrived at after a three day colloquium in New Delhi in December 1994. The document ⁿoted that despite the fact that South Asia has a great civilisational legacy and is severly constrained by internal and external conflicts.... the largest single concentration of regional poverty exists. In this context the media is construed as an integral part and not "detached observers". Attempts are on to evolve a media charter for South Asia in time for the Eighth Summit of

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SAARC. (Heads of State). The colloquium also called for methods to ensure a positive contribution by the media to alleviate the multifaceted problems of the region. From the balanced coverage perspective regular coverage of the region by the media was considered essential. An important point that was noted and is problematic is the question of hostile propaganda against other countries and the role of the media to promote goodwill etc., Freedom of Information Act as a guideline for the countries and issues related to access etc., were addressed.

Reference to this colloquium is made to emphasise that we have now reached a certain degree and level of understanding that allows us to talk to each other on a common platform.

This topic is relatively new and refreshing . Our concerns with communication and development have obscured serious analysis of many other issues. The silent growth of media institutions in South Asia has a new dimension Satellite television. Thus professional and ethical concerns transcend barriers and reiterate some of the problems that have been addressed in many national, regional and international forums. Economic imperatives and enthusiastic response to globalisation have made market accessibility and penetration easier albeit on an unequal terrain. Thus, the issues may not be specific in terms of their manifestations

in mass media. The role of the state in the direct affairs of the media is apparently minimal compared to what it was after the countries in ^{the} region gained political independence. A regulatory role for the state is becoming evident with the judiciary occasionally interpreting the scope and nature ^{of} state powers vis-a-vis media.

This changed context does not necessarily mean that the societies have changed in terms of their political, social, economic, cultural and religious variables. In fact, these variables have accentuated casting doubts about the approaches to various problems. This preamble is an over simplification of the social context in which communication media are an integral part.

The spectrum of ^{com}mun~~ity~~^{ication} activities in the region encompass different media which are governed by the political and economic factors applicable to the respective countries. Clearly, there is distinction between journalistic and other related media practices. Journalistic practices refer to the activities that are central to the art of collecting and presenting news and current affairs in different media. Other media activities include entertainment and educational programming. Advertising supports these activities. Thus, the interface between communication and society exists through contents. However, contents are produced and at times manufactured in

different media as a consequence of decisions taken by the owners, managers, editors and software professionals. The dimensions of agenda setting and gatekeeping should be kept in mind before we attempt any meaningful approach to this issue.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that as part of the developmental approach, we have great expectation about the capacity and capability of the media to tackle the numerous problems. This is another assumption that stirs our efforts to examine ethical dimensions. The defense to adopting this approach is unanimity among all countries and societies to work out certain directions for media. Thus, communication ethics is a crucial concern.

A scholar interested in promoting a culture of peace, by which we understand conflict resolution and cooperation, examines the question in terms of five problematic areas: challenge of active participation of all individuals ... especially of poor majorities and minorities; moral conscience; challenge of value crisis; challenge of professionals related to conflict between self regulation and government intervention; conflict between journalistic investigation and everyday information; conflict between credibility and loyalty ; and the challenge of communication for peace. This does not ignore or avoid conflict but stimulates public questions about the structural causes of conflicts.

The structural causes of conflict relate to institutional violence ^{including} indulging social injustice, ^{and achieving} Political and other goals through violence and at times non violence and the repressive violence by those in power. These conflicts, the scholar argues can be traced to lack of participation. Here the focus is not on moral or legal recipes but on foundational ethics. A serious area of concern for us to pursue.

Another approach to communication ethics is to understand them from the perspective that is developed in media saturated contexts. This is on the assumption that media practices and institutions of developing contexts (to which this region belongs) are by and large shaped by models that already exist.* This is the western democracy oriented approach to communication and media practices. The policy in this region has time and again challenged these notions. Debates surrounding the New World Information and Communication Order ^{have} ~~have been~~ ample testimony to evolve an approach that reflects our concerns.

These models allow us to consider five substantive issues: invasion of privacy; truth telling; exploitation, violence and democratic participation. In terms of priority, questions related to exploitation, violence and democratic participation are more important.

For an easier understanding and better explanatory framework media can be divided into print, electronic and advertising. This does not obviate the fact that the merger of telecommunication technologies may render such a distinction obsolete. This infact is a major problem as the delivery mechanisms have a cross media and transnational dimension. Nevertheless, I prefer to take the conventional approach for reasons that will become obvious.

Print Media

The contextual reference for a discussion is the degree of commonness that prevails in the evolution of print media in the region. India, Pakistan and Srilanka have imbibed certain values and practices that reflect that colonial roots. Bangaladesh has an extended manifestation. In the case of Nepal an assessment by Shri K.C. Shyam Bahadur presents a clear and relative picture of the region.

¹¹ Press everywhere depends on the economic well - being of the people... Nepal does not have a very bright picture to present. Perhaps with the exception of Bhutan and Maldives, the Nepalese press is among the least developed in the SAARC countries. The press in India, Pakistan, Bangaladesh and Srilanka have a much longer histroy than does the Nepalese press. Today there are upwards of 400 dailies, weeklies and fortnightlies registered with the government. Whether they published regularly is another matter. ³ //

Therefore, within the region we have many similarities and a few differences.

The problems that have a bearing on ethical issues relate to what the society can expect from the media. Here the state, media and society develop a peculiar relationship. The framework within which the state operates to govern and deliver a wide range of services to the people allows certain mechanisms of information dissemination in which the media play a conveyer role. Traditions in which the media, especially the press, have grown allows the media to go beyond this function and assume a watchdog role. The power that media wield as a result allows them to escape closer scrutiny in terms of how they exercise their power and influence. Who owns the media and why many industrialists want to own a newspaper minimises the awesome responsibility they claim towards the people. The political and economic and, in certain cases, military nexus that exist poses a broader ethical question of the so called independent media. This is different from state control of the media where ipso facto the interests of the state prevails over the interests of the people. Ownership, therefore is a problem for our concern.

The operations of the media ie. the generation of contents comes next. In the area of news and current affairs it is related to how and why certain contents manifest more than others. The problem is more acute in sensitive issues

that relate to industrial, economic, cultural and religious matters. For example, What role should a journalist play in the region when many interrelated developments are taking place especially in the industrial and economic arena. The advent of transnationals, their priorities, and associated conflicts in broader ecological related ethical issues - Social engineering, bio diversity, marine resources, export oriented shifts in traditional occupations towards cash oriented ventures - Even documenting these rapid changes systematically and analysing their impact is a concern. However, the huge advertising budgets of many of these companies may lead to a conflict of interest. In the present context, at least in India with the rise of owner-editor syndrome, the issue borders on the journalists sensitivity being in conflict with the owners. There are other interests which have a direct bearing on the younger generation- the drug mafia and the state's inability to confront the menace. Basic threat to life may relegate coverage of such issues.

Journalists as individuals are not immune. The incentives that a lopsided economy offer is attractive. Housing, land priority allocation of scarce infrastructural elements and influence peddling are some of the changes which challenge the ethical identity of a journalist. Cover journalism or envelope journalism is rampant especially in publications which offer pittance as salary to the journalists. For example, film reviews are managed through

this system and it also explains the heavy bias towards films and film personalities in the nation's policy^t at least in few states. Although not related to this region, Richard Schaffer's analysis of the constraints on Practising Ethical Journalism in Developing nations is a good pointer to some of the issues. His conclusions are significant.

"Certainly ^{it} ~~their~~ is an agreement envelope journalism diminishes the self-esteem of journalists who practice it and likewise diminishes the credibility of the press itself. Corruption among journalists is very difficult to document. Everyone suspects it is rampant but no one wants to admit to practising it. Publishers, it is evident, are often in collusion with corrupt journalists, particularly when they tacitly encourage envelope journalism by paying journalists wages they can barely survive on, knowing these journalists will be forced to find creatively unethical means to augment their salary by prostituting themselves professionally."

In India and other countries in the region the constitution of ^{the} press council, among other aims, includes an oblique function which is to build up a code of conduct for newspapers, news-agencies and journalists. The connotation of build up indicates the role for the press council to adjudicate cases and evolve a code. Press council, thus is an institutional mechanism where issues come to the fore. However, doubts persist about the

efficacy due to lack of any power. Nevertheless, the attempts by press council are laudable in this regard. The press council in India suggests that comparative studies of various codes of journalistic ethics drafted and published in various countries indicate that basic principles are universally recognised.

The issues identified by the press council upon which a code has been drafted are as follows:

1. Accuracy and fairness
2. Prepublication verification
3. Privacy
4. Right of Reply
5. Covering communal disputes \ clashes
6. Plagiarism
7. Recording interviews and phone conversations
8. Obscenity and vulgarity
9. Caution in criticising judicial acts
10. Avoidance of crass commercialism
11. Photographs of dead bodies of victims of crime \ accident

Guidelines spanning some of these points have been issued.

An important ethical issue that has cropped up more in India and perhaps applicable to other ^{countries} conflicts in the region is the spectre of communalism. The Ayodhya issue is too well known for any elaboration here. The role played by the media is far from satisfactory and problem is definitely an ethical one. What considerations and precautions should a journalist have in reporting communal disturbances. This problem has become acute in the context of the rise of fundamentalism and religious intolerance in the region. In some situations it is ethnic.

Sukumar Muralidharan analyses the issue with respect to India by incorporating one other variable, affirmative action. Based on his study of the coverage he avers:

"The act of informing is a value laden process. The emphasis given to specific developments, the tone and content of the coverage of an event (or a sequence of events) by the press- these reflect a certain implicit ordering of social priorities... There are instances when the coverage of certain developments displays characteristics so persistent and so strong, that they cannot be taken to be merely idiosyncratic or incidental... Such for instance has been the case with the coverage of 'Mandal' and 'Mandir'. The scale of values of the national English language press, as reflected in its allocation of print and

visual space, and the tone and content of its coverage amply shows that it has derived inspiration from the ideological fount of undifferentiated Hinduism.

These issues do not reflect an apathy on the part of the journalists. In fact in Bombay it is virtually a war between two factions of journalists / editors. ^Sexpounding opposite views and concerns. The attacks on each other is virulent. The Shiv Sainiks' bullying tactics has been recorded. Editorials - vile and vitriolic, culling names ^S and physical attacks have become the order of the day.

Analysts are keeping their fingers crossed as to what would happen if the party comes to power and the results indicate that it will form the government.

This is a problem as it reflects the social, economic and religious parameters which have been translated into an electoral agenda and formation of state. Under this dispensation, the regulatory function of the state is suspect.

At the regional level, for example, some attempts have been made to discuss media and pluralism. AMIC and South Asian Media Association (SAMA) organised a seminar in Karachi in Oct - Nov 1992. The seminar after analysing case studies from India, Pakistan and Srilanka, ^{the same} ⁸ Recommendations and suggestions have been made (Reference).

Another issue that is ethical is the question of portrayal and representation of women in media. Analysis about the visual media - Film and TV - supercedes that of the print.

Ethical dimensions operate at the level of recruitment and subsequent attitude of the establishment towards women journalists. By and large it is patronising and lending a shoulder to cry on attitude. In cases where women take "independent" views, they are slotted for coverage of women's issues, not so much in terms of how women are affected, but more in terms of catering to their interests stereotyped in that role model preferences. The study incorporates a section on Forward Looking Strategies (FLS) drawn up at the 1985 Nairobi meet.

One publication examined this issue closely and came up with a solution both from inside and outside.

Including more women into the media especially in decision making positions is one way. But this is not the only solution as the surely argues that is is important to draw every progressive element into the struggle particularly those from the opposite sex, whose support is essential if any dent is to be made in profession which is so male dominated'. Adopting a non-sexist code, initiating orientation courses for senior editors and policy makers and tips on using the media are other suggestions. It may be

pointed out that international organisations are developing guides for non-sexist language. For example, UNESCO has adopted the guidelines in all its publications.⁷

It may be necessary to mention another regional publication which deals with abuse of women in the media. The Consumers Association of Penang after examining various issues has come up with its recommendations. (PP 76-77).⁹

Although media portrayal have not changed much there is greater sensitivity to the problem. Analysis of film songs and campaigns against obscene posters have been taken up. Providing orientation and media education programmes for center board members, especially women, are on the anvil.

A curious dimension to ethical issues lies in the recent case involving an investigative Tamil periodical and a powerful English fortnightly in India. The issue revolves around the contention of both periodicals in stating that a controversial story of the notorious sandalwood smuggler Veerappan was a property of these respective publications. Involved in this drama was a journalist who reportedly sold the story to the highest bidder. Monetary gains seemed to be the only reason. This issue has been carefully addressed by the Press Council which has dismissed the complaint of the Tamil periodical. Truth may never come out, but the charges and counter charges by both parties reveal an unhealthy cheque book journalistic practice.

The state using the media under its direct control raises a few questions. For example, in a sensitive area of foreign relations, the official media in all the countries deals with issues and events pertaining to each other that heighten the conflict that already exists. The coverage of ethnic conflict in Srilanka, attitude towards Nepal, coverage of riots in Pakistan and coverage of Kashmir issue reflect not only the animosity but also the relative position of these countries. I am referring to the coverage of issues in Doordarshan. We are also aware of the role played by Srilankan, Pakistan, Nepalese and Bangladeshi media. There are bilateral concerns and multilateral interventions. The movement for co-operation should reflect in concrete action and agenda for the media. Appropriately the agenda worked out by the colloquium in New Delhi raises these issues and suggests a few guidelines.

Cultural exchange programmes are a small step in this directions. But they confine themselves to a few centres only. Another dimension to this problem is the problems posed by satellite television. The offshore operations reflect the traditional practices of airing programmes in a manner that is prejudicial to the interests of the countries in the region. BBC's coverage of this region and events in particular are in conflict with what and how the governments view the developments. A case in

point is the D.D's coverage ^{if} Ayodhya Vs. BBC's coverage. Both took cover under the guise of objectivity and responsibility.

Questions are being raised about the future of broadcasting institutions in this region. In India, the proliferation of private networks with or without political affiliation has raised a few ethical questions for the operators. Where do they draw a line in terms of feeding the programmes. Cable bill provides for mandatory telecasting of official programmes which is only a defense mechanism. Other programmes are discussed on the moral and cultural plane. Serials with what are considered as bold scenes have become controversial. Late night screening of adult movies are described as nothing but pornographic. Political parties have questioned this practice. The ethical dimensions here have a public and private domain and for the network it is the profit motive that transcends societal concerns.

Pan regionalism can either be fostered or affected through these channels. At the same time bigger countries and power in the region should be wary of the cultural and ethnic concerns that smaller countries have. Cultural imperialism is not what only the U.S. and U.K. can be charged with.

This presentation has touched upon a number of issues and due to limitation of constructing the problem linearly it has taken several issues. This consultation should examine the problems based on the feedback and comments.