

# Ethical standards : the role of press councils and journalists unions

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**Ethical Standards :  
The Role Of Press Councils And Journalists Unions**

**By**

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"Communication Ethics from a South Asian viewpoint"

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"Ethical standards: the role of Press Councils  
and Journalists Unions"

One:

The universality of communication ethics, their world-wide relevance and applicability across continents, across cultural and national frontiers acquire a particular intensity in South Asia for at least the following two reasons:

a) The extraordinary diversity and heterogeneity of the South Asian region in virtually every respect of creed, class, caste, dialect, language, culture, race are nevertheless contained within a large yet unifying homogeneity: the identity of a South Asia civilizational persona which seeks to preserve a heritage of shared values and ethics in the face of advancing urbanization and industrialization that erode and weaken this identity with new values and ethics.

b) Communication through the mass media and specially the electronic media is growing <sup>at</sup> a pace faster than other aspects of social and economic development, e.g. faster than print literacy, thus opening up the possibility that a critical "knowledge by-pass" is taking place. Unlike the industrialized countries in which electronic media developed after the

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people had achieved print literacy, in South Asia, electronic media are promoting a new evolving culture of contemporaneity that prioritizes consumerism, acquisitiveness, competitiveness, imitativeness and material progress as adjuncts of electronic literacy even before people have had the opportunity to imbibe their historic values, ethics and knowledge through the print media.

Two:

Therefore, communication ethics from a South Asian viewpoint have an exceptional sociological significance: they relate to a set of principles and perceptions concerning an extremely varied and volatile region at a time of great ferment when change is affecting the nerve-roots of the people.

Three:

In a comparative context, the South Asian region in contrast to other regions is markedly deficient in media development and media communication, except for one or two regions of Africa. Measured by the criteria of access to radio, TV and newspapers, the vast majority of the people rank amongst the bottom 40 to 50 countries of over 150 developing countries.

Only in cinema do the people of the region in some parts enjoy somewhat convenient access to a medium of communication.

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Four:

In a region and in an era of severe social turbulence, are ethical standards unequivocally defined and explicitly recognized? Or are ethical standards too also undulating, shifting and imprecise?

Five:

On certain issues, ethical standards can be clear and consistent. For example, on the rule of law, on the need for integrity in public office, on the need to strengthen democracy, there are abiding, universal, undisputed values. However, in an era of unprecedented technological change and rapid social and demographic transformation, some issues raised by genetic engineering are already introducing new ethical questions.

Six:

Traditional notions of fairly fixed, permanent ethical standards are being challenged by an amalgam of mixed values in which pragmatism has assumed primacy over idealism, in which privacy takes second place to media scrutiny, in which the public persona of a human being has superseded the rights of the individual.

Seven:

There is a notable difference in the manner in which the Press observes ethical standards with regard to the principle of individual privacy and the principle of accuracy and the manner in which radio and TV generally observe the same.



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Eight:

Whereas the Press perhaps by its very nature is frequently accused of violating both privacy and accuracy, the electronic media are not similarly accused. Partly because their nature is less prone to such violation and partly because radio and TV in South Asia are either often owned by the State or controlled by Government. This is surely one of the distinctly beneficial aspects of official control of the electronic media -- as in France and Italy or Pakistan and Sri Lanka. As a result of this, there may be an excess of political propaganda but there is a virtually total absence of individually defamatory attacks, except in cases where there is political defamation by Government of the Opposition.

Nine:

Where the Press applies high standards to every institution and individual, the Press in South Asia is fairly reticent and reluctant to publish analyses about the proprietorial vested interests of Press owners. There are instances wherein through the newsprint import system or through favours granted by Government, Press proprietors have secured substantial financial benefits. When the public is denied access to such information through sheer omission or disinterest on the part of the Press, a set of double ethical standards are applied by the Press itself.

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Ten:

The Press is also sometimes reluctant to raise or pursue issues that may have an adverse impact on its advertising revenues. While a direct connection between editorial policy and advertising bookings is disclaimed by the Press, there are examples where the Press prefers to maintain cordial relations with a major source of advertising revenue rather than to rock the boat. To its credit however on issues such as dangers to human health from tobacco smoking, the Press has been a vociferous forum for the expression of views by the anti-smoking viewpoint while at the same time accepting advertisements from tobacco companies promoting smoking - presumably on the valid ground that as long as it is legal to manufacture cigarettes it is unfair to deny cigarette-makers the right to advertise them.

Eleven:

The principal characteristic of Press Councils as advocated by the Press is that of a self-regulatory body which minimizes or does away altogether, wherever possible, with a role for the State in enforcing regulation upon the Press. While the preference for self-regulation in Press Councils may be a strategic choice to ensure freedom of the Press and avoid interference by the State under the pretext of regulation, this option also has the potential disadvantage of reducing objectivity and detachment when the Press has to regulate itself.

Twelve:

With this inherent anomaly about self-regulation, there is also the nebulous dimension of the vested proprietorial interest of the owners of the Press. Press proprietors invariably act through a collective body such as a newspaper publishers society. That is a valid form of self representation. However, when proprietors are also editors the proprietorial interest also comes to feature in the position taken by Editors' Councils on vital issues, sometimes blunting their sharp edge or, when strong positions are endorsed on paper, depriving actual implementation of effectiveness.

Thirteen:

It is revealing to remember that the institution of the Press Council has failed to become truly effective even in the country acknowledged to have a genuinely free Press such as the U.K. Neither the excess of the tabloid Press nor the extremities of the "serious" newspapers have been curbed by the existence of a Press Council in that country. Whether it is the case of a single individual like Elton John who in November 1993 accuses the Mirror group of newspapers of both wild slander as well as "cowardice" in portraying him inaccurately or whether it is the case of the Sunday Telegraph that maligns the Pakistan cricket team in April 1993 with banner headlines and then publishes an apology in October 1993 at the base of page five, the Press Council of the U.K. is an apt example of the contradiction between the Press operating as a strong and vigorous institution and on the other the Press Council failing to develop into an effective regulatory body.



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Fourteen:

It is pertinent to note that, on the average, of, say every one hundred news stories reported in the Press perhaps less than five or ten violate ethical standards and that therefore the overwhelming bulk of material handled by the Press itself meets ethical standards. It may then be said that a five to ten per cent volume of violation is a tolerable "margin of variance". The question however arises whether the individuals and the organizations that are adversely affected by this so-called "margin of tolerance" are suitably compensated by any collective action taken by the Press or by the Press Council or whether their sensibilities and interests may be sacrificed at the altar of the 90 per cent volume that meets ethical standards. In the Press, perhaps more than any other institution, the "margin of variance" cannot be the same as the margin of error tolerated in other sectors because news and perceptions shaped by news reporting are critical to the social, universal values of integrity and accuracy.

Fifteen:

A margin of error is tolerable in "printers' devils" or in syntax or construction of language, page layout, or even editorial priorities but is not acceptable in respect of defamatory material often published without checking for accuracy with the subject of the story in advance.

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Sixteen:

A shoe factory may produce out of its total production about five per cent shoes that are defective and those five per cent are not going to <sup>substantially</sup> damage the honour or the interests of the shoe factory proprietors, its workers or indeed even the purchasers of the defective shoes. However, a single incorrect news story can have a substantially negative impact on the victim of the report which subsequent clarifications or contradictions will not wholly correct.

Seventeen:

Thus, there is a need to develop and enforce autonomous, credible, alert and active Press Councils with an adequate level of participation by private citizens representing the interests of readers and of society, a form that combines the function of a Press Ombudsman with the function of a quasi-legislative Press forum to become truly effective Press Councils.

Eighteen:

Journalists unions are primarily concerned with the economic rights and interests of working journalists. In theory they have an equal interest in upholding ethical standards amongst their members. In practice, they are preoccupied with wages, salaries, fringe benefits and working conditions. While some large and some small publishing groups are offering fairly reasonable incentives and incomes, journalists unions have considerable work to do in seeking to

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obtain decent incomes and facilities. In certain cases, due to their special position as media-related bodies, journalists unions obtain additional benefits in employment-related issues such as Wage Boards, etc. thus freeing them to give more attention to ethical standards.

Nineteen:

In general, whereas journalists unions have played a sterling role in advancing the struggle for democracy and constitutionalism, they have been relatively lax in enforcing ethical standards due to obvious difficulties in monitoring and regulating the conduct of their own members.

Twenty:

As a degree or a diploma is not mandatory for entry into journalism, and as the possession of a degree or a diploma is no guarantee of ability or integrity, there is a discernible number of individuals who work as journalists ~~and~~ who, either through ill-intent of misusing their position for personal gain or through sheer incompetence, violate ethical standards. Again as in the case of the Press as an institution, the question is whether the number of such individuals and their respective positions is so high as to warrant extraordinary concern. After all, the overwhelming majority of journalists are individuals of integrity and ability. Thus, all it takes is just one or two aberrant persons to make glaring violations of ethical standards.

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Twenty one:

Press Councils and journalists unions are important institutional mechanisms to safeguard professional principles and ethical standards as well as to help evolve and enforce new approaches and strategies to maintain an equilibrium between the freedom of the media and continuous accountability of the Press to the people.