

Watchdogging the watchdog

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1978

Mansor Ahamad Saman. (1978). Watchdogging the watchdog. In AMIC Seminar on Mass Media and Socio-Economic Change : Kuala Lumpur, Oct 21-22, 1978. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research & Information Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/91547>

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1549

SEMINAR: MASS MEDIA AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

MARA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

21 and 22 October, 1978

PAPER: "WATCHDOGGING THE WATCHDOG"

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WATCHDOGGING THE WATCHDOG

THE Fourth Estate, they say, acts as a watchdog over the other three Estates. Perhaps it is true that the Press does watch over the Executive, Legislative, and the Judiciary. Perhaps it is true that the Fourth Estate plays this role in most countries. And perhaps, it is more true in some countries than in others. It all depends on how you define the "watchdog role" or what a "watchdog" is.

We wonder who plays the watchdog role on the watchdog. Does the Press play the watchdog role on itself? Lets not answer this question yet.

So what is a watchdog? Maybe we should start with a silly definition. A watchdog is a dog who watches. Haa, that doesn't sound too bad for a silly definition. Thus, a dog who sleeps is not a watchdog. So also is a dog who is awake but is not watching - he is not a watchdog. (I know I should be using "it" here, but, nevertheless, I will keep on using "he" just simply because I feel more comfortable with "he"). So, a watchdog is a dog who is awake and watching. Just being awake is not enough.

But we have not finished with our definition yet. A watchdog, we say, is a dog who is awake and watching. But watching for whom? Does a watchdog watch for himself? Perhaps no. A watchdog should be watching for his master.

Lets fool around with our definition some more and link it to the Press. So, in the case of the Press, who is its master? Or, is the publisher/owner its master? Or, perhaps, the government is its master? Or, can it be that the people are its masters?

Well, this is up to the Press to decide. And this is a very important decision. The master or masters will have to be determined and decided upon, because this then will determine and define the watchdog function of the Press.

in determining who its master is or who its masters are, perhaps we should look into the responsibilities of the Press. To whom does the Press owe its responsibilities?

Perhaps many people would agree if I say that the Press as an institution, among other things, has to shoulder the responsibilities towards the people working in it. It should care for their wellbeing; it should be responsible to its reporters, journalists, editors and so on and so forth.

And also, the Press has responsibilities towards its owner(s) or publisher(s). It has to strive to be a viable concern because the owner(s) has (have) put in a lot of efforts and wealth to get it going. Thus, in societies where the Press, among other things, is a business concern, those involved in it will have to shoulder the responsibilities in ensuring that, among other things, it should also be an economically viable operation.

We do not deny that the Press also has responsibilities towards the government or the authority of the State in which it is operating, such as, for example, responsibilities in together pursuing common and accepted ideals of the society. But, as with its other responsibilities to the other parties mentioned, these responsibilities of the Press towards the authority of the State should be carefully defined so as they are not misinterpreted or interpreted in a lopsided manner.

But, ultimately, the greatest and the heaviest responsibilities of the Press are surely its responsibilities to the society and the people it serves. These are the heaviest of all responsibilities simply because it is the people, the society, that makes it possible for the Press to exist. The Press, in other words, cannot exist in a vacuum. And perhaps, these are the toughest and the most difficult of all the responsibilities for the Press to shoulder.

The Press, in carrying out its responsibilities to the people, will have to fully understand the aims and aspirations of the people and the society. It has to understand the ideals and the cherished values and beliefs of that society; and also, the philosophy of life and the sensitivities and the taboos of that society. This, undoubtedly, is a very difficult task. But, nevertheless, the Press, and those involved in its operation, will have to try their best in achieving this.

So now, going back to the question of who the master or the masters of the Press is or are, we can, therefore - based on this breakdown of responsibilities - perhaps conclude that: The masters of the Press are the people.

Thus, the Press, the watchdog, is a watchdog for the people.

Of course, a somewhat paradoxical situation arises in this case: The owners (and also operators) of the Press are not its masters, but the consumers - the people - are. Thus, therefore, the Press, operating within the societal, cultural, political and philosophical context of a society will have to play its watchdog role within this context, for the wellbeing of the people. Because, let us say it again, the people are its masters. The owners and operators are only its servants.

But this becomes a little bit complicated in most underdeveloped or developing nations. It is true that the Fourth Estate still plays its watchdog role; but it plays the role rather differently, simply because there is a difference in the definition of who the master of the watchdog is.

In most underdeveloped or developing countries, the master of the watchdog is either defined to be (1) the government, or (2) the elite class (and sometimes the two are synonymous).

Anyway, in the context of an underdeveloped or a developing country, the Press, if it is not playing the role of a servant to the government, will play the function of a watchdog for the elite class and protect this class's interests and vested interests. Interests and vested interests here are defined to mean not only material interests but also social and cultural interests - in the form of cultural norms, social values, etc. - and socio-structural, political, and other interests.

Assuming that the Press is playing the watchdog role on the government for the elite class, the government distrusts it, simply because it is not representing the people as such. And thus, the government, more often than not, would not acknowledge and perhaps try to curb, the importance of the watchdog role that is being played by the press. (And perhaps rightly so in such a situation?). Thus, the government would end up being the watchdog on the Press while, at the same time, the Press is supposed to be the watchdog on the government.

We, therefore, end up having two watchdogs watchdogging one another. But, of course, one watchdog is big and the other is small. So, in the final analysis, the big watchdog (the government) would often "bark" at the small watchdog (the Press), and if the small watchdog does not heed the big watchdog's "barks" it may end up getting bitten.

Until and unless the Press in the underdeveloped and developing countries decides that its masters need to change from either the government or the elite class to the people or the society as a whole, then this dilemma will persist. Until and unless this happens the Press's watchdog function is going to remain ineffective.

We are, however, not saying that the watchdog function of the Press in the developing world is non-existent or totally ineffective.

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The Press may not function as a "check and balance" mechanism on the other Estates, but it does play its role in a larger context.

By just being a channel of information, I think, the Press is performing its watchdog role in the broader definition of the concept. Information helps people to be aware of what is going on, and thus, enable them to make rational - or, at least, informed - decisions on whatever is needed to be decided upon.

So, the Press, by virtue of the fact that it disseminates information and reports on the doings (and undoings) and the activities (and inactivity) of the other Estates, plays this watchdog role.

But the trouble with the Press in most underdeveloped and developing countries is that it only reports on the doings and forgets or ignores the undoings; it only reports on the activities and forgets or ignores the inactivity, of the government. And even in the reporting on the doings and the activities of the government seldom does the Press do it fully with the necessary information and explanation as to the implications of all the doings and activities with regard to the people.

Undoubtedly, the watchdog function or the watchdog role of the Press in the developing world can be improved. And the improvement or the betterment of the function in this respect will be for the benefit of all concerned.

But first and foremost the Press itself must be aware of its role. The Press itself must define what its role is, or should be, in its society - and once this is defined there will be a clearer sense of purpose and a better sense of perspective as to what it wants to do and can do. Nobody else can do this for the Press except the people involved in the operation of the Press themselves.

As it is, perhaps our watchdog is awake but not watching.
