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Freedom Of The Press And Asian Values In Journalism

By

Owais Aslam Ali
Freedom of the Press and Asian Values in Journalism

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INTRODUCTION

To me, the discussion of Asian values seems to be a continuation of the debate about development journalism. As with development journalism, one of the difficulties in discussing Asian values is defining what the term means. The diversity of religions, ideologies, traditions, political systems, and levels of development makes it almost impossible to define a set of values that may be applicable to all of Asia.

SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATE MODEL OF JOURNALISM

As with development journalism, the need for an Asian model of journalism stems from the dissatisfaction felt by many people in the Third World that Western news values have not served the cause of national development. Roger Tartarian (1978) describes national development in the context of developing countries as:

"The monumental uphill struggle to weld often disparate ethnic, tribal or religious groups into cohesive new nations while bettering their social well-being through economic progress."

Many feel that the Western or "libertarian" model of journalism had not contributed fully towards national progress because of its emphasis on the entertainment function of the mass media and its treatment of information as a "saleable market commodity" (Ansah, 1991). Indeed, many feel the media, based largely on Western news values, have at times worked against national cohesion and development. In a critical assessment of the media, Merill (1970) says that because of television and newspapers

"Anxieties are created, magnified and perpetuated; religion is set against religion, social class against social class, race against race and nationality against nationality."

Another criticism of the existing news values is that they are elitist in nature and present a warped picture of society. Traber (1985) points out that the conventional rules of newsworthiness, like timeliness, prominence, proximity, conflict, and the bizarre, have created, especially in the Third World, a media that serve the ruling elite by concentrating almost exclusively on speeches and statements of the prominent, controversies of politicians in major cities, and rituals of public life, like ribbon cutting ceremonies. The media exclude the vast majority of ordinary people unless they are subjects of accidents, violence and catastrophes.

Thus we find that, for very different reasons, both the governments and the people of developing countries are dissatisfied with the Western model of journalism and have been trying to develop models they feel would serve their needs better.
The first attempt at this was the model of development journalism. In contrast to the Western model, the primary function of development journalism was not merely to keep a watch on government actions but to promote the development of the country. Peter Godling states that development journalism could promote national progress by (1) stressing the educational function of news, by raising the awareness of events and issues, (2) by producing stories about social needs or problems in the hope of stirring governments into action, (3) by highlighting self-help projects that can be implemented by other communities and (4) by reporting on obstacles to development (in Guneratne 1980).

PROBLEMS WITH DEVELOPMENT JOURNALISM

Unfortunately, development journalism became embroiled in the acrimonious debate surrounding the New International Information Order (NIIO). Western media organisations dismissed the concept as “government say-so journalism” while the promoters of the concept tried to defend it with their own versions of what the concept really meant.

The viewpoint of Western journalists and academics was that the concept of development journalism implied that freedom of expression and other civic liberties were “somewhat irrelevant” because a majority of developing countries faced tremendous problems of poverty, illiteracy, and disease. The role of the mass media in such cases was to support authority and highlight the achievements of the government, not challenge or criticise it, because the alternative to a stable government would be chaos (Hacten, 1987).

There was some validity in this criticism as development journalism combined two very distinct issues namely, the utilisation of communication channels including the mass media as tools for development, and the control of the media by the government in the name of development.

The use of communication for development has always enjoyed a measure of legitimacy. As far back as 1947, the American Commission on Freedom of the Press, the “Hutchins Commission”, described agencies of mass communications as the “most powerful” educational instruments which must assume the responsibility for “stating and clarifying the ideals towards which the community should strive” (Ogan, 1982).

Similarly, the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, also known as the McBride Commission, said effective use of communication was “essential for mobilising initiatives and providing information required for action in all fields – agriculture, health and family planning, education, industry and so on” (Ogan, 1982).
The problem is not with the utilisation of communication for the purpose of development, but, rather, with the control of the mass media by governments in the name of development. The justification offered for government intervention and control of the mass media, that many young nations are not yet strong enough to withstand the controversy and confrontation produced by a free press (Tartarian, 1978) does not impress the overwhelming majority of Asian and other Third World journalists who have struggled hard to promote the cause of press freedom.

PRESS FREEDOM IS ESSENTIAL FOR ASIAN JOURNALISM

It is vital that any discussion of Asian values should accept that the role of the media as a watchdog of society is central to the practice of journalism and there can be no justification for stifling dissent or competing viewpoints. As Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, in his address at the recent Freedom Forum seminar on Asian values in journalism very rightly said:

It is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices.

The address by the Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister was a pleasant departure from the complaints, especially from those in authority, that the press is obsessed with reporting only negative aspects of society and is guilty of spreading despondency instead of fostering hope. At first glance the charge may seem justified. Newspapers are filled with reports of corruption, experiments with democracy going horribly wrong, elections bringing into power communal, ethnic and religious extremists, and civic amenities crumbling due to poor planning and execution. Readers have become tired of insults and accusations being traded by different groups of equally unethical and unprincipled politicians. Everyday newspapers present their readers with demoralising details of crime, fatalities and civil disturbances.

However, before condemning the independent press we must realise that its obligations to society include acting as its watchdog, reflecting the concerns of the people and creating informed public opinion through objective presentation of facts. Once reporters accept these responsibilities, they really have no option but to report the truth, no matter how unpalatable it may be. For example, while the media should not play up ethnic and religious differences, it is duty bound to faithfully report views of militant politicians who command sizeable public support. However most quality newspapers in Pakistan do not reproduce unparliamentary, derogatory or provocative language that may inflame passions.

Except for a small section of the press that thrives on sensational coverage of crime, commotion and crises, newspapers in most Asian countries, including Pakistan, are neither alarmist nor defeatist. In fact coverage of the ills of society reflects people’s underlying desire to improve things. For example, during long periods of dictatorships
and authoritarian rule, the Pakistani press has kept the hope of democracy alive. It has also played a positive role against human rights abuses by exposing cases of extra-judicial killings, rape and torture by law enforcement agencies.

In contrast to the independent press, the state-controlled media, which include radio and television, present an unrealistically positive and sanitised version of reality. Their coverage is filled with achievements, real and imaginary, of whichever government is in power, sermons of government functionaries and inauguration ceremonies of development projects. Unpleasant realities that would project the government in a bad light are either downplayed or ignored altogether. Because of the lack of credibility, state-controlled broadcasters have failed to fully utilise the tremendous potential of radio and television in raising the people's awareness of serious social, environmental and development problems facing our countries.

Another reason for inability of state-run broadcasting in effectively presenting their message to the people is that official concepts of national values are often far removed from reality and seem to be a nostalgic yearning for a past that never really existed. For example, soon after television came to Pakistan, a television code was published which said television would "endeavour to project the best traditions to which we as a nation are identified." It then listed a long list of vague objectives such as "to promote positive values and eliminate negative ones." It also listed over a hundred do's and don'ts to be adhered to by advertisers and programme producers.

This oversensitivity over not offending the sensibilities of any segment of society has severely stifled local creativity. Thus, as in other countries, television authorities in Pakistan were caught unprepared with the sudden arrival of satellite television and are now scrambling to make their programmes more appealing so that they may compete with an array of channels available to viewers. In this age of the information revolution it is futile to waste our energies trying to stop the flow of news and views. The only way to meet the challenge is to free the creative talents of our people so they can compete with their Western counterparts in a level playing field.

We have been tolerating the onslaught of foreign influences from the days of colonialism to the present. I think it is time we start becoming more tolerant of the views of our own people. The values that emerge as a result of the free expression of views by Asian journalists will inevitably be Asian in character. As S.M. Haque (1988) rightly states, news is a social construction of every day occurrences viewed in the light of cultures, priorities, preferences, concerns, sensitivities in an invisible but powerful undercurrent of attitudes, values and norms.

The experiences of most of our countries show that the governments cannot be trusted to be custodians of our values. While there may be laudable exceptions, most of our governments have cynically misused our traditions, religion, culture, and values we
hold to be dear as justification for suppressing human rights. For example, the war with India in 1965 led to the imposition of emergency rule and suspension of civil liberties in Pakistan. People accepted the denial of their fundamental rights because they thought the government was acting to safeguard national security. However, while the war lasted for only seventeen days the people had to suffer the emergency rule for twenty years, because the draconian laws made it easier for rulers to keep the population under control.

We should, therefore, remain vigilant that discussions on Asian values in journalism are not hijacked by politicians and government officials and used as a justification for control of media. For the concept of Asian values to develop and to have credibility Asian journalists, who have been struggling to reduce government involvement in the media, and not politicians or bureaucrats should be at the forefront of attempts to create a form of journalism relevant to the needs of our countries while, at the same time, fostering traditions of a free press.

NEED FOR ETHICAL VALUES IN ASIAN JOURNALISM

There can be no denying the need for evolving workable ethical and professional standards that would preserve our values and promote press freedom. The need is especially urgent in emerging Asian democracies like Pakistan where the press is under considerable pressure from government officials and politicians who complain that the press has not used its new-found freedom with responsibility, and accuse it of sensationalism, character-assassination and disinformation. I cite two recent examples of attacks where authorities contended they were forced to act because the press was acting irresponsibly.

On June 29, the provincial government of Sindh banned six newspapers in the troubled city of Karachi because it said they were "printing sensational news which is an activity prejudicial to the maintenance of public order." While maintenance of peace is a laudable objective, action against these papers was unjustified because it is the politicians and not newspapers that are responsible for the deplorable state of law and order in the city.

Another example is the recent arrest in Lahore of Zaffaryab Ahmed, a freelance journalist campaigning internationally against the use of bonded child labour in the Pakistan’s carpet industry. He was arrested for “anti-state” activities and accused of acting in a manner “detrimental” to national interest because his campaign could affect the country’s carpet exports and cause loss of badly needed foreign exchange. While one can disagree with the merits or sincerity of the campaigners, I personally think that no country can create a favourable image simply by censoring unsavoury aspects of our societies.
Although the Pakistani press rejected government assertions these actions were in national interest, the incidents highlighted the need to evolve self-regulating mechanism that preserve our hard-won freedoms. In Pakistan, efforts are being made to evolve a workable code that would discourage unethical practices, improve the standard of journalism and reduce chances of government intervention in the affairs of the press. I feel that more important than a code itself, is the process of arriving at it. Rather than permitting codes of ethics to be imposed, there should be exhaustive discussions and continuing debate on the ethical dilemmas facing journalists.

Such discussions would, of course, encompass the whole range of issues such as promotion of national values, goals and ideal. I believe Pakistani newspapers have made important contributions in promoting national culture and traditions. While there is considerable room for improvements, the coverage given to the arts, literature, cultural heritage, health and environment in Pakistani newspapers and magazines is far greater than would be justified if readership value was the only criterion. They have also played an important role in promoting social values, such as respect for human rights.

However, one area where our press can do more is in reflecting the values and hopes of the majority of the people and not just of the elite. In most of Asian countries, including Pakistan, media coverage of rural areas, where most of our people live, is haphazard, dull, sketchy, and negative. The main reason is that rural journalists lack professional skills to cover complex developments and changes affecting their communities and, therefore, confine themselves to reporting crime and rehashing press releases of district administration and politicians. Recently, efforts have been launched in Pakistan and other countries to train rural journalists so that they can adequately cover developments in their areas. It is to be hoped that, these efforts will, over time, give a greater voice to the rural majority who are underrepresented in our media.

These are exciting and challenging times for journalism in Asia, with bright prospects for the continued growth of an independent press. What Asian journalists need most is the freedom to tell the truth and to freely express their views. I believe our religions, our traditions and our cultures are strong enough to withstand controversy and criticism. However, great harm will come to our countries from attempts to suppress the truth.
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