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Communication Ethics From A South Asian Perspective:
An Overview

By

Regi Siriwardena
COMMUNICATION ETHICS FROM A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE: AN OVERVIEW

by Regi Siriwardena
Editor, ICES

Questions of communication ethics -- whether in South Asia or anywhere else -- can’t be regarded as simply a matter between the individual communicator and his or her conscience. In the daily choices of the professional life, the communicator is subject to the pressures, constraints and deterrents exerted by a variety of forces -- State laws and regulations, and sometimes even extra-legal forms of coercion, the preferences or aversions of heads or proprietors of media institutions, the influences of powerful interest groups, and the convictions or prejudices of dominant sections of readers, viewers or hearers. Between these different forces the communicator often treads his or her way as warily as through a minefield. However, the pressures acting on the communicator don’t come entirely from outside; some of them may be internalised in personal loyalties, antipathies or biases.

What I have said so far may seem simply a re-statement of the obvious: yet how often do we ignore these realities when we discuss the freedom of the media? Some people, for instance, talk of independence of press, radio or television as if this could be equated with the absence of State control or intervention, forgetting that there are pressures -- political, financial, social and cultural -- which act no less powerfully, though perhaps less visibly, even on privately owned media institutions. I cherish a story about that legendary model of the independent and principled liberal journalist, C.P. Scott of the Manchester Guardian. Once one of his leader-writers wrote an editorial condemning a project to put up a gasworks in a quarter of the city where it would cause large-scale pollution. It so happened that the owners of the projected gasworks were among the largest advertisers in the newspaper. The editorial didn’t appear, but the leader-writer found this note from C.P. Scott on his desk: 'We must never suppress the truth, but we have sometimes to economise on it.'

I don’t tell this story in a cynical spirit, as if to imply that all talk of communication ethics is irrelevant, and independence of the media a pretence or an illusion. There are, after all, degrees of economising on the truth, and degrees of suppressing it, too. What I am concerned to stress is that the cause of raising ethical standards in the media isn’t served by laying down some absolute code divorced from the real social and political contexts in which communicators function. This seminar in other sessions will focus attention on some of the specific structural, legal and political factors affecting communication ethics in South Asia. In my paper I shall concentrate on what seem to me to be three fundamental issues. Firstly, what is the role of the media in relation to the state and civil society in South Asia? Secondly, what are the implications for the media of the multi-linguistic and multi-religious character of South Asian societies? Thirdly, what is the position of the media as regards women? If I say that all these are
questions that have, for the purposes of the present seminar, an ethical dimension, I don’t mean that they are questions that can be answered on the basis of some universal moral code (personally, I don’t believe there is one). What I mean is simply that these are questions which involve choices in terms of values, even though some of us may see these values as provisional, tentative or open to continual revision in the light of changing social relations and human experience.

Once upon a time -- but I am not talking of the age of the fairytale but of a relatively recent period stretching approximately from the ‘fifties to the ‘seventies -- there were in South Asia powerful groups who believed in the supremacy of the state as the necessary path of progress in these developing countries. In India and Sri Lanka, under centre-left regimes state dominance was given legitimation by ideologies of social welfare and egalitarianism; in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, under right-wing military or absolutist regimes, it was clothed in the language of national security. These statist ideologies had necessarily their implications for the media; they could be used to justify censorship as well as other forms of state intervention -- even, in Sri Lanka in 1973, the takeover of a newspaper group. Since that time the statist ideology has lost much of its strength in both theory and practice. Privatisation and free competition in the market are growing to be the new economic orthodoxy in South Asia, as in many other parts of the world, and politically, liberal democracy is assumed to be its natural concomitant. Yet even those South Asian regimes which most ardently espouse free market economies show no real enthusiasm for openness in the media.

There is an interesting contradiction in State policies in South Asia towards the different media. On the South Asian scale outright State ownership of newspapers has been an aberration; ruling regimes have generally preferred less direct forms of control, intervention or influence on the press. But State ownership of radio and television has been the rule. Even where private channels exist, as now in Sri Lanka, the state retains its monopoly of dissemination of internal news and comment. Several reasons may be suggested for these dual policies with regard to the press as against other media. There is the precedent of state ownership of the radio, set already in colonial times. There are the factors of the greater audience reach of radio in South Asian countries and the visual immediacy of TV, both of which carry advantages that regimes in power are reluctant to lose.

Many of us in Sri Lanka have admired -- and envied -- the long-standing independence, diversity and vigour of the Indian press, and now of the Pakistani press since democratisation. But while the maximum freedom from State control is a necessary condition for the health of the media, it is not a sufficient condition. The Western liberal watchwords of ‘the free flow of information’ and ‘the open market of ideas’ conceal the fact that even under conditions of total privatisation, there may be no real equality of access by all groups of society to expression through the media. That is where the free market model is, just as much as the statified one, an
inadequate guarantee of democratisation of the media.

Criticisms of media structures in South Asia, especially by active politicians, often concentrate on the imbalance between Government and Opposition in access to or coverage by the media. Certainly, it is better to have a contest between Government and Opposition in the media than to have total subservience to the State. But Opposition parties are still special interest groups, and the existence of pro-Opposition media as against pro-Government -- in practice in South Asia that means pro-Opposition and pro-Government newspapers -- is not enough. This is proved by a phenomenon that has been enacted over and over again in our part of the world. Regimes which in power used the media to their own advantage have fallen; Opposition parties, which criticised the former rulers for their abuse of the media, have come to power; but the undemocratic and oppressive structures of communication have survived. That is why it is necessary to say that the most fundamental ethical principle of media communication should be not just that of holding the scales even between Government and Opposition but that of being open and responsive to the whole range and diversity of needs, interests, opinions and aspirations within civil society. And especially, of those groups who are disadvantaged and whose voice is less often heard -- the poor; linguistic, religious or cultural minorities; and women.

The aspect of minorities assumes particular importance in the ethnically diverse societies of South Asia, with the recurrent conditions of conflict in several of them. The ethical problems that communicators face in relation to such conflicts surface particularly sharply in situations of open riot or civil war. On such occasions, even the non-partisan communicator may be faced with a clash between the principle of reporting exactly what happened and the possible consequences of such a report in exacerbating violence. The liberal slogan of 'Publish and be damned!' that may seem honest or courageous in other circumstances appears in a different light when the result may be not a libel suit or a jail sentence but the large-scale loss of other people’s lives. But I don’t want to imply that the ethical problems of communication in societies divided by linguistic or religious conflicts are confined to extreme situations of violence. These offer only special instances of ethical questions which perpetually confront the communicator in such divided societies.

Several recent theorists of nationalism have drawn attention to the central role of communication in creating and disseminating nationalist consciousness -- most notably, Benedict Anderson who has argued that nationalism arose only with what he calls 'print capitalism'. Anderson has been criticised on the ground that he has underplayed the strength of pre-modern forms of communication such as oral tradition in fostering group identities. That criticism is probably justified; but there can be no doubt that these identities, and with them unfortunately, the potentialities of conflict between different nationalities or ethnic groups, gained an enormously added strength with the rise of modern forms of communication. However, within the modern nation-states of South
Asia the potentialities of conflict lie not only in the fact that
the different identities of linguistic or religious groups have
been solidified by mass communication. There is also the fact that
what in a pre-modern South Asian society might have been a
localised clash between two contending groups in a village becomes
now a national event because it is projected by the media and its
ripples spread far beyond the original scene of violence.

Observers of ethnic and religious riots in South Asian countries
in recent times have often drawn attention to the role played by
partisan or biased reporting and expression of inflammatory opinion
in the media. It would be too simplistic to say that such riots
were caused by the media; the relative importance of media in this
respect, as against the influence of provocative rumours or the
element of deliberate organisation of violence by interested
groups, is often difficult to assess. As a large generalisation, it
may be said that the role of media in relation to such outbreaks of
violence has been less often that of acting as the immediate
trigger than that of creating a long-term state of feelings and
attitudes which, given the appropriate situation, erupts into
violence. That is why I want to concentrate on one example where it
seems unlikely that the communicators intended or were aware of the
fact that the outcome of the message they were projecting would be
an act of mass religious violence.

Perhaps the most extraordinary media event in any South Asian
country in our time was the telecasting by Indian TV of the Rama
story as a serial. It achieved an incredible popularity, taking on
partly the character of a media carnival and partly of a religious
ritual. It has been said that in many places across India on Sunday
mornings ordinary life came to a standstill while people sat with
their eyes glued to their TV sets. Probably the serial's makers and
sponsors had no other intention than that of creating a popular
media spectacle. This is not to say that the serial was innocent of
any political character. In a recent essay titled 'A Historical
Perspective on the Story of Rama', the eminent Indian historian,
Prof. Romila Thapar, points out that there are many versions of the
Rama story, textual as well as oral, and that the TV serial
privileged one version, 'familiar to North Indian Hindi speakers,
and broadly to the literate few elsewhere.' She goes on: 'The
choice of this version therefore makes a specific social and
political statement, becoming all the more significant given that
television is part of the Government-controlled media. With such
powerful backing the serial comes to be seen as the national
culture of the mainstream.' But while the serial had therefore a
definite ideological character, its main consequence was perhaps
unforeseen by its authors. For there can be no doubt that the Rama
story on TV played an enormous part in helping fundamentalist and
extremist Hindu groups in boosting their cause in the Ayodhya
dispute. The culmination of this process was the demolition of the
Babri Masjid in December 1992, which led to massive violence,
destruction and loss of lives throughout India.

I have used the Ayodhya affair and its media prelude to suggest
the ethical aspects of the immense power that media people hold in
their hands. It is a power that can be disintegrating and catastrophic in its consequences in our societies, divided as they are on religious, linguistic and cultural fault-lines, unless it is used with a wisdom and foresight that is conscious of the plural character of these societies and of the perils of fragmentation.

Finally, I wish to say a word about the role of the media in relation to half the population of South Asia. I mean those who are born female, inherit the traditional disabilities attaching to women in South Asia and are subject to the prejudices, stereotypes and pre-conceived assumptions in terms of which women are still for the most part seen in our societies. Women’s groups in South Asia have often criticised the gender biases, implicit or explicit, in mainstream media representations of women. Any viable communication ethic in South Asia today must take into account the treatment of women in the media, and I hope this aspect will receive its due importance in discussions during the next four days.