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Communication Ethics And Media Practitioners: Facets Of The Sri Lankan Experience

By

Lucien Rajakarunanayake
Communication Ethics and Media Practitioners

Facets of the Sri Lankan experience

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Lucien Rajakarunanayake
The Free Media Movement

1. Ethics and the Media Practitioner is a subject we often hear in Sri Lanka, especially when those who are affected by the fundamental role of the media, which is to inform, become uncomfortable by exposure. We are not unused to the many instances, including the current times, when many questions have been raised about the ethics of journalism and the need for a Code of Ethics for journalists. Such a code has in fact been formulated by the Press Council of Sri Lanka. The fact that this is not very well known by journalists is more a reflection of the ineffectiveness of the Press Council than the ignorance of the journalists.

2. The situation of the journalist in Sri Lanka could well be described in the words of the New York Times columnist William Safire who said that when they like us we are the Press and when they don't like us we are the Media. Whether AMIC likes us or not, and notwithstanding the fact that journalism is not, in the strict sense of the word a profession, I would certainly go along with the definition of Media Practitioners. But in Sri Lanka we have in recent times been called "paththarakarayas" or newspaper delivery men, acid throwers, terrorists and those without even the training of a bus driver.

3. The situation in Sri Lanka today is one where there is a great confusion about ethics and the ethical. Although much is often said about the need for ethical standards in key areas of activity, we live in times when there is a total breakdown of ethical values, giving way to the largely questionable values of the marketplace and the glory of profit. A country which lays down by law that education shall be in the mother tongue, happily allows the mushrooming of international schools which teach only in English - the mother tongue of almost no one. In a country where free health is still a public boast, the state hospitals are being deliberately under-funded and run down, while the explosion of private practice, especially in private nursing homes, raises many questions about the ethics of medicine and medical practitioners. The practitioners of law seem extremely happy with a scale of fees wholly unrelated to the realities of legal redress. The examples in the various
professions go on and on ad nauseam, while ethics in
government and politics is a subject best left untouched.

Discovery

4. This is the unfortunate but necessary background in which we
have to discuss the subject of Communication Ethics and Media
Practitioners in Sri Lanka. It is a situation where ethics
will first have to be discovered, rather than one where there
has been a rich tradition to be followed or built upon.

5. For many years Sri Lankans have lived in the acquired belief
that we have had a very strong and independent Press, that the
Freedom of the Press is quite safe in our community and that
we have a journalistic profession and media owners who pay
great allegiance to the ethics of the profession. We are now
in the latter stage of the discovery that this is furthest
from the truth. The ethics of communication as we have known
it in Sri Lanka is what has been built during a period of a
near monopoly of the Press ownership, by sections that were in
the main, happy to use the Press to support the governing
establishment and the social forces that lay ranged behind it.

6. This situation became even worse with the early entry of the
State into the electronic media, and the subsequent
acquisition by government of the largest newspaper
organization in the country. The complete ownership that
governments have had over the decades of radio broadcasting
and in the initial decade of television, has virtually shorn
these sections of the media of any ethical standards, apart
from a bureaucratic litany of rules in advertising which pass
of as ethics. The electronic media in Sri Lanka, faced with a
sudden explosion in privately owned stations, has no norms or
ethics except the rules set down by the State, for their
guidance and performance.

7. It was no accident, therefore, that in the televising of the
funeral of the late President Premadasa, the state owned TV
station thought it fit to replay a recording of the
assassinated president's last political speech, as the
background accompaniment to the lighting of the funeral pyre.
The speech was wholly accusatory of the late president's
political rivals. It was more the ghoulish than the ethical at
play in a society which still largely believes that funerals
are places where enmities are forgotten or should be.
The electronic media is today functioning under a set of guidelines which makes no secret that it is the primary function of radio and TV to tell the people of the government's development policies and activities. There is in this more than a ring of the Third World Media proposals of the recent past. Proposals which saw the emergence of government-owned News Agencies which deteriorated very fast, and not unexpectedly, to the propaganda tools of government and not the sources of information they were touted to be.

Brazen Ethic

The guidelines for the electronic media make no mention whatever of the ethical need to give the other side of such development strategies. The ethic, stated quite brazenly, is that only one side need be known. There is also a more dangerous ethic which is being propagated, that even an attempt to give the other side could amount to subversion or in simpler terms being anti-government.

The reason I deal with the electronic media at the outset, instead of the older medium of the Press, is because of the much wider reach this media has today. The magnitude of this reach alone underlines the urgent need for the formulation of some ethical guidelines for a section of the media, in which there is increasing capital investment and the rapid acquisition of great technical skill, in the absence of wholesome ethical values.

The need for such ethical values is, however, more easily said than done. How are they to be formulated? Who is to formulate them? How much trust can we have in the professionals themselves to undertake this task? Even with such trust, will they be free to do so? What external examples do we look at without being mere imitators of the West? Are there Asian or Third World examples we can reasonably follow? Or, are there any traditional values or ethics which can be the basis for such ethical standards. These are matters which all those concerned with the electronic media in Asia will of necessity have to consider.

It is regretted that the answer to the last question, with regard to the Sri Lankan experience, is certainly in the negative. The influence of government from the inception of radio in the country - initially it was a section of the departments of posts and telecommunication - has in no way helped the rooting of ethical values in broadcasting. This is not to absolve others of their own share of responsibility in this matter. It is also due to the general acceptance by the intelligentsia, that the Government has some right to conduct...
its own political propaganda at public expense. Until the overall dominance of government in the media was seen in the post-1977 period - extending to this day - there has been little concerned discussion about the ethics that should govern the electronic media in Sri Lanka. Even today, the discussion is more in the nature of giving some space to the political Opposition, as opposed to the broader ethical need to give some space to a wider array of opinion.

13. There is also the confusion of what is ethical with what is traditional. A confusion which leads to the trap that what is traditional must necessarily be ethical. This is best seen in the dilemma that the electronic media faces with regard to the response to the threat of AIDS. Medical opinion is convinced that the threat is very serious. Social workers also share this view. Yet the State-owned electronic media which has the widest reach, does not know how it is to give this message to the public, without treading on the corns of tradition. The confusion over helping the protection against AIDS with the encouragement of SEX of the safe variety, prevents the electronic media from carrying out the necessary educational role it is best equipped to fulfil.

Information Ethic

14. The basic shortcoming appears to be in the lack of appreciation that the electronic media, specially that which is owned by the State, has a wider ethical function to keep the people informed. This does not absolve the private stations of this responsibility. But the peculiar structure of the electronic media in Sri Lanka, its overall reach and the language of transmission places this responsibility more heavily on the State. A State which has demonstrated that it does not trust the Information Ethic. This is an attitude which has been common to all parties that have held power in Sri Lanka, be it of the right, left or middle.

15. The ethic that is dominant is one of secrecy. A secrecy that seems to be ethically justified either on the basis of the need for official secrecy in administrative terms, national security with its broadest possible misinterpretation and worst, in the view that the public need not know. Or, in the idea which is often encouraged that there are others who know best what the public should know.

16. If this is the situation in the electronic media what do we see of ethics in the Press? The Sri Lankan Press has a good history in terms of chronology. We boast of some of the oldest newspapers in Asia. Our levels of education did produce journalists of great capability. We often take pride in the
fact that many newspapers, particularly in East Asia, were dependent on journalistic talent from Sri Lanka for their launch and continued success. With such a background it would be not unusual to expect a strong commitment to Communication Ethics in the world of Sri Lankan newspapers. Yet, the more we search, the more we discover the absence of such ethical standards.

17. Earlier in this paper in referred to the historical context in which the traditions of our newspapers were cast. The dominance of the English educated, the somewhat confused demand for independence among the middle classes, the patronizing—when not contemptuous—attitudes towards the national languages and the Sinhala and Tamil Press have all contributed towards the absence of a proper respect for Communication Ethics in the Sri Lankan newspapers.

Open conspiracy

18. Although unable to lay the blame for all its sins on State ownership the failure to develop a proper Communication Ethic has been largely due to the attitude of the newspapers to the Government in power. In the first years after independence we saw the two main newspaper groups—Lake House and Times—generally engage in an open conspiracy to support the government of the day. If the Times was more critical in some instances, it was a criticism born of the frustrations over style rather than content. Lake House, the group with the largest circulation, was happy to believe in its capability as King Maker behind doors, in addition to the power to mould public opinion.

19. The Ethic of the time was quite simple. It was to keep the Left out of power. This was seen quite clearly when the Times, which was critical of the UNP of Sir John Kotelawala, turned even more against the first Bandaranaike government than did Lake House. That government gave only a whiff of the left but even that was too much.

20. The attitude of the major newspapers in the country towards the trade unions is one of the best illustrations of the total absence of a genuine ethic of communication or information. As the middle class feels the pressures of the constantly rising cost of living, the newspapers would write regular editorials on the subject. It would report, albeit in truncated form, the meetings and resolutions of trade unions, all leading up to trade union action over the cost of living or increased wages. Yet, when a strike over prices or wages did take place, the newspapers would in general unison condemn it, exhort workers to get back to work and provide overall support to the
government. This support came even if it meant the use of emergency powers to break a strike.

21. The Ethics of Communication is not something the Press in Sri Lanka bothers with even today. The right of reply is one which is not often respected in full by most of our major newspapers, and we have so few of them in any way. We are quite often treated to examples of a series of one-sided articles on a given subject, with the closure of the debate being imposed by the Editor when the pet line of the newspaper is challenged with vigour.

22. This absence of communication ethics in newspapers is not surprising in the situation of a general breakdown of the norms of truth and decency in society. We meet this most of all in the reportage of the current war, or anti-terrorism drive as some would have it, and the attitudes that the major newspapers take on this issue. On the one hand we have newspapers which editorially berate the holding of carnivals and "tamasnas" while a war is going on and yet feel no compunction in organizing Road Shows for major advertisers or Beauty Competitions with gala dinner dances. On the other we have newspapers which exhort governments and political parties to come to terms on a settlement to the ethnic conflict and take the lead in openly sectarian propaganda which can only exacerbate the crisis.

Circulation scores

23. One particular example would illustrate this absence of regard for the ethical in communications. A leading Sinhala newspaper, which has been strongly critical of the attention paid to cricket in the midst of the current war (a matter which the newspaper has every right to do), did not at the same time hesitate to devote at least five major articles in its Sunday issue to cricket. Two of them were satirical pieces in keeping with the "line" of the newspaper. The others were a clear attempt to sell the newspaper through the popularity of the game.

24. The divisions in the country caused by the continuing war in the North and East have also contributed, if not to the emergence of a strong Communication Ethic, to the distorting of whatever little values we may have had. I would make a point here of how newspapers, whether English or Sinhala describe those who have been arrested for smuggling of contraband, generally gold or narcotics. If the person apprehended or arrested in a Sinhalese, then he is just a person, a businessman, a passenger from Singapore or some such
place. The community is never mentioned. However, if the person arrested or apprehended is a Tamil, you can be sure the community will have prominence, even in the headline. There will most probably be a comment by an unknown Customs or Police officer about connections with narco-terrorism or the financing of the Tiger war effort.

25. It was only last week that we saw a report in one newspaper about suspicious stores of urea based fertilizer in the premises of the Tamil Union Sports Club. Quite a big raiser of suspicious eyebrows. Urea is much in demand by the Tamil Tigers. Some Tamil businessmen have been implicated in its transport to the North. Now, you have the Tamil Union Sports Club, storing it. Ever so suspicious. It finally ends up as very legitimate cargo, stored by a government-owned business. The correction is published, but the newspaper makes no apology for not checking the veracity of its source in the first instance, or not obtaining the views of the Tamil Union at the outset.

26. The reporting of the war in the North exposed in great measure the absence of a proper ethic of communication among the Press in Sri Lanka. There is general satisfaction to go by the regular situation reports issued by the Defence Ministry. What often passes off as on the spot reporting of the war is a report which has been obtained on an official conducted tour of a light battle-zone. Very little or no effort is made to give the all important viewpoint of the people of the affected areas, particularly in the North. Newspapers that make genuine complaints and strong criticism of waste in government expenditure, for some reason have decided it is more ethical to remain silent over what may be much bigger waste in the matter of arms procurement and the disbursement of funds for the war.

27. Accidents by the Security Services, defeats in battle at considerable loss of life - both of the official troops and the Tamil Tigers, questionable promotions, continued extensions granted to senior personnel are all glossed over with little regard for the accountability to the public who fund the fighting to the tune of nearly one fourth of the national budget, if not more.

28. If the situation with regard to the reportage of the war leaves a great deal to be desired from the point of view of the ethics of communication, there is also much that is wanting in the reportage of other areas too. The reportage of financial and economic scandal generally stops at the surface
or with much that is left for the reader to understand through nuances of style. The very principle of information through communication is affected by the constant fear of the libel suit, the advice of the company lawyers or the other business interests of the newspaper proprietors. Time and again, issues of current and topical significance raised by newspapers have had a strange way of being buried with the guarantee of never being resurrected. The concern for the right of the public to know - which must be at the core of any Communication Ethic - is completely ignored.

The situation with regard to the rights of the individual is even worse, especially with regard to the State-owned newspapers. The period of the Premadasa government saw the nadir being reached with regard to the respect for individual rights and privacy. Character assassination of rival politicians, critical journalists and even those who just did not agree with the Government became the order, in the government-owned newspapers. It was a period when even the assaults on journalists carried out by the police and pro-government thugs found some acceptance in the government Press. There were calls being made for the elimination of those whom the government, and its fellow traveling journalists identified as "fascists" or "terrorists".

The Alternative

No discussion of the media in Sri Lanka will be complete without mention of what is popularly known of the Alternate Press. Their very emergence was due to the absence of a proper adherence to the Ethics of Communication by the major newspapers, and the fact that alternate opinion was confined to the newspapers of rival political parties. That there was a need for these newspapers, with their greater degree of independence and more forthright comment, is obvious from the success achieved by two of them in having a weekly circulation in excess of 30,000. This would, in my view, of necessity change their description from the alternative to regular Press. However, one cannot be wholly satisfied that the Alternate Press itself has paid much regard to the Ethics of Communication.

There are increasing signs that even these newspapers, with a more specific political message to convey, and with a degree of stridency in comment, are also falling victim to the conditions that ail the wider circulation newspapers. Whether it is due to staff shortages or the tyranny of deadlines with hired printers, there is increasing evidence that these newspapers also do not pay adequate heed to the checking and re-checking of facts, the right to reply and the safeguarding
of individual privacy. However, they have contributed much by demonstrating a new ethical standards in the approach to the war in the North and East - which is the problem that poses the major threat to democracy and free expression in Sri Lanka, as well as, by opening their columns to news and views which would have no place in the older newspaper with their misplaced ethics of class.

32. It is the unfortunate reality that Communication Ethics is not a dominant factor in the Sri Lanka Media, despite the country having a very old tradition of newspapers. The reasons for this are many. The limited number of newspapers in the country; the interests of newspaper publishers which are at variance with the demands of a vigorous Press; the non-acceptance by the political establishment of the need for a genuinely Free Press; the dominance of government in the media; the power of advertising, which has been little touched in this paper; and, the overall belief that freedoms flow from the centre are all contributory factors to this situation in greater or lesser degree.

33. Adding to the crisis in Communication Ethics is the lack of opportunity for training of journalists. This is an area to which media institutions have paid the least importance (except in a very technical sense, the State electronic media). The expansion of the scope of the media, the diversity of subjects of major public importance such as the environment, science, law and economics, require a greater degree of training and sophistication among media practitioners. It is a matter which should demand the immediate and very grave attention of all media practitioners, the owners of media institutions and also the educational authorities, particularly the universities.

34. It would be obvious in this context that academic training alone would not suffice. There has to be a strong practical element in the training, with constant opportunity for refresher study facilities. An immediate need here is the support for regional newspapers which could well be the basic training ground for all media practitioners before they venture out into the large arena of work. It is in such places that the Ethics of the Communication could be imparted, to be strengthened with the gathering of experience. But most important is the appreciation that the Ethics of Communication needs firm definition in Sri Lanka and a greater commitment to it by the more senior practitioners in the media and media institutions.

Colombo
November, 09, 1993.