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Environmental And Cultural Factors Affecting Media Ethics

By

M Tawhidul Anwar
Environmental and Cultural Factors Affecting Media Ethics

Media ethics does not debunk or ridicule philosophy as cunning rhetoric, neither philosophy is a semantic game. Philosophy being a hyphen between theology and science, between feeling and reason in a larger canvas, ethics in its small scope is that branch of philosophy which studies the principles of right or wrong in human conduct, a normative science of conduct at that. Media ethics, therefore, should set forth guidelines, rules, norms, codes and at the least "broad principles of maxims that will lead, not force the journalist to be more humane, but not necessarily more "human"."

In the ethos of journalism there are two kinds of codes—written and unwritten. Written codes are criticized for being of little help in making decisions as the values they list are obvious values, the behaviour they enjoined are clearly bad behaviour. Ethics is more complicated than that. Ethics is not the codes. The present day codes seem to be full of glittering generalities. That way present day media codes are lacking muscles. Codes are still aformous. Therefore, public concerns over newspaper codes of conduct are caused less by the things they do but by their failure to explain what they do. Pitted in this perspective the demarcation between written and unwritten codes are so tenuous that baffles both the people and the press. It is here that the elevated state of the cultural life of a people and of the socio-economic environment within which a nation functions can provide some cue to understanding "right" from "wrong". This values judgement by humans however is both time and space specific.
Debates are there around the very canon which says that the job of the journalist is to pursue truth. The journalist ought to understand the dynamics of truth perhaps even before understanding the peculiarities of news. This is one version. The contra argument has been that the 'reporters should merely observe and write their observations down. When you say the job of the journalist is to pursue truth you are saying that reporters must put themselves into the stories by making judgements about what is really going on.'

The practice of pre-trial by journalists on reporting courts has of late become an obsession with them never caring for the bounds within which he or she is to work. The subdued urge for a democratic order for the last decades in our society and the advent of that order after 1991 election have set the media on to a stage where the broad feeling seems to be among the city centered elite and political activists that everything from farmers need to judicial verdict must as if to be first told by the press. The concept of fourth estate is lost in the process.

The press in Bangladesh today has a few sacred cows. The army is spared but at time not even the judiciary. The initial fillip towards being critical of the judiciary came from the cultural format through theatrical media which had the spurt of excellence in terms of both content and performance after the liberation war of 1971. When the performers became near idols and the contents simple but forceful and can even be transferred to street audience, both the performers and the content found an easy entry to the electronic media. As the contents remained more than less political and history specific, the administrative ministry of the electronic media had the option only to accept whatever comes in the way in this form of a cultural movement. The negativism in the contents is a hangover of our culture of opposition while in Pakistan, the positivism in an atmosphere of free press in a democratic country is what is coveted. In the name of a progressive move to correct the society the theatrical contents allowed even
the judges to doze while the court is in session. The protest litigation followed making the electronic media to include the judiciary among it sacred cows. But the print media continue to behave as it used to. Of late, they played up stories on a litigation by lawyers against a playwright whose book portrayed how the lawyers take gratification and share the same with the judges. The progressive lawyers say the playwright was right and are helping the writer out of this legal tangle. The media in this environment got a hidden bonus to start writing even on subjudice matters.

The Bangladesh television's recent series "Kothao Keo Nei" (None Is These Anywhere) in its last episode gave a verdict against Baker, the hero, who outwardly posed to be violent against social evildoers by choosing the life of an evil but having the benign inner self for his fellow friends and neighbours doing whatever good possible, challenging the heinous acts of outwardly aristocrats but always freezing his love and longing and holding his tears to the icicle of his doomed existence. Just before the last episode every newspaper carried stories saying "Baker to be hanged today" as if this drama serial is a reality. In fact, every paper went in sympathy with the processionists in the street demanding that the television should change the episode to free the hero to lead a life. The playwright in a statement said, sorry. Himself a chemist, a stubborn university Professor, the playwright had to be given temporary protective custody by the administration. It was a unique interaction between the viewers, the lawyer, the administration and the electronic media on the last episode of a TV serial. The entertainment side aside, the judicial system was being questioned through a cultural format by the help of both print and electronic media.

Infact the society which is already sifting a number of socio-political issues is taking resort to any medium to ventilate their simmering discontent.
In this process of mobilization of peoples' aspiration against the process of accumulation of societal ills over decades, the process of integration has set in, in the form of flexibility of the media to accommodate diversified contents which in the past could not be conceived.

In this flexible state of the media mere objectivity is increasingly being questioned as emphasis on objectivity can at time obscure the truth. Objectivity may become mere presentation of two sides of an issue that distorts proportionate importance of each. Most of the Bangladesh newspapers, barring a few, have chosen as their policy to go for a tilt even in news treatment. The disproportionate weightage of the same event in different newspapers tend to provide more of misinformation and at times bordering on opinionated interpretation of events. This is annoying.

A number of newspapers go for a divide on the question of pro and anti-liberation forces. Another group of newspapers go for moderation to integrate these contending forces. The third group concentrate on religion as a vehicle of their policy. News treatment in these newspapers therefore vary. It is interesting to note that the papers at the cross road or taking a neutral political position and critical of all is under some sort of societal pressure.

But those harping on liberation war sentiment or religion seemed to have safer sanctuaries from political forces. They are nevertheless popular even with definite disavowal of ethical considerations in the treatment of news. Accuracy, fairness, balance, comprehensiveness to name a few of media ethics can hardly be found in these papers. The freedom is unfettered. The news mostly carry views.

On the question of the right to privacy of individuals they more go for violation. For this they choose the opposing political contenders or the poor man and women at the lower echelon of society.
If we read between lines of 21 codes of conduct for Bangladesh press given out by the Press Council (copy annexed) we can easily comprehend that the innumerable litigations at the council and the verdicts thereafter have one thing to say and that is that the press of Bangladesh had so long been behaving irrationally to a great measure.

The administration has also taken a cautious stance not to meddle with even unfettered freedom of the press as the experience had been that if you go for gagging you contribute to their increased circulation. The result is assuring. The yellowish papers are turning white. At this opportune time the Press Council says it is going to amend the Act of 1974 to include provisions in the form of power to suspend accreditation of journalists, publication of newspapers, public sector advertisement, postal concessions and the like for specified period till they behave, at least, in line with the codes of ethics. The press codes of ethics published is advisory in nature. But as all the papers carried it, the council will increasingly use these codes already unquestioned by the press to be the reference point for any adjudication. The press council proposes also to go for amendments to cancel the authentication of the declaration of the newspaper if it is found to have committed offence or offended against standard of journalistic ethics or tastes on three occasions within a period of twelve months. The aggrieved however will have the right against the decision to seek a final review by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. The council which is a quasi judicial body currently looks after repairing the demages caused to image's. There is a consensus among publishers, editors and journalist to strengthen the council to function with increasing role to punish not merely censure or admonish those found wronging while reporting.
The unwritten codes of the press will anyway escape the perview of the above ethical discipline because they are deeply embedded in the newsroom culture and a set of reflexes religiously held by individual newspapers. Here are few examples: Every newspaper avoid directly admitting a mistake; older editors are more restrained than the younger ones; the publishers are more likely to see money set in an unemotional context; newspapers are written for the newspaper people; and the whims and caprices of the chief person at the desk conditions the news treatment of that day of the paper.

In the doctrine of press pluralism now are being tried in Bangladesh, formulae are being perfected in the form of codified norms of conduct and strengthening of the Press Council and democratic culture with a broad agreement among those who should take care while publishing or reporting in a reasonable and responsible manner is being nurtured to see both private and corporate rights honoured without affecting the access to information of the journalist and right to reply of the aggrieved. Let us hope for that cultural attainments with high literacy which will create conditions conducive to a responsible press even without the help of coded ethics or whips of laws.

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References


Annexure

Press Code of Ethics for Bangladesh

The Press Council has announced a 21-point code of ethics for the journalists.

The code of ethics is as follows:

(1) It is the responsibility of a journalist to let the people know about any matter which interests the people or create impact on them. The news reports and news commentaries should be prepared and published with full respect for the personal rights and sensitivity of the newspaper readers.

(2) The newspapers and the journalists have to ensure the veracity and correctness of the available information.

(3) The information available from reliable sources may be published in the interest of the people without any risk of punishment. If any adverse situation arises due to publication of such news the journalist concerned should be excused if the item is published with good intention and the information is found reasonably believable.

(4) Rumours and unconfirmed news should be checked before publication and those should not be published if found unbelievable.

(5) The news items which are found baseless and publication of which is deemed to be a breach of trust cannot be published.

(6) The newspaper and the journalists reserve the rights to express their opinion strongly on debatable issues in such cases: a) They should project the fact and express the opinion clearly. b) No incident should be distorted to influence the readers. c) In the news item or in the caption, nothing should distort with a motive behind. d) The opinion on the main story should be highlighted clearly.
(15) The editor of a newspaper shall not be in a position to change the nature of a rejoinder. The rejoinder and contradiction of the party and parties concerned, directly or indirectly, with a news item, shall have to be published on priority basis in one of the pages of the newspaper that draws the attention of the readers very easily.

(16) It is the moral duty of the editor to publish corrigendum with regret on the editorial comments, if there is any mistake and any party is affected by the wrong information.

(17) It is much more immoral to publish a news item with malice than a wrong item without any malice.

(18) It is the moral duty of the editor to admit the total responsibility of all publications in a newspaper.

(19) The reporter concerned should take precautions in investigating any allegation and should try to become sure in case of preparing any investigative report on the basis of allegation of corruption against any person or institution and thus he or she has to become sure about the accuracy of the incident.

(20) It is immoral to avoid responsibility on the part of a reporter on the plea of reprinting any news item though it is true that any news item in a responsible publication which nobody protested can be the source of news.

(21) It is the duty of a reporter to project the moral degradation in the society. But at the same time, it is the duty of a journalist to become more cautious publishing any news item concerning any woman and the relationship of a man with a woman.