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<td>Rahman, M. Golam.</td>
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Freedom and Responsibility in the Mass Media: Focus on Bangladesh

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Human actions are interpreted in terms of purposes, in social sciences. Men act in an effort to achieve something. Man's behavior is conditioned by the purposes it has in view. Freedom in the sense of "freedom to" means the opportunity to prefer or select everything for himself. All institutional or social arrangements are limitations on freedom inasmuch as they forge restrictions on individual choices. The modern trend is to offer social contents to individual choices. The freedom of expression which includes the freedom of the press forms part of the various devices of freedom. Freedom generally means the absence of restraint. But that indicates a negative concept. The positive concept is a call to the creation of conditions and the development of institutions which are "necessary guarantees of individual happiness". The absence of impositions from without is one thing; the presence of conditions helpful for the expansion of the individual is another thing. When men are not forced, they are free. They cannot be forced into freedom.

It is pertinent to note while discussing on mass media the fundamental rights that has been guaranteed by the constitution of the Republic.

"Art '93 (1) Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed. (2) Subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the society of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order,
decency or morality or in relation to contempt of Court, defamation or incitement to an offense—(a) the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression is and (b) freedom of the press are guaranteed."

The Constitution has thus kept the balancing theory in view while guaranteeing the freedom of speech which is hedged by "subject to any reasonable restriction." The legislature may impose restriction upon the freedom of speech on the following grounds.

i) Friendly of State
ii) Friendly relations with foreign States
iii) Public order
iv) Decency or morality
v) Contempt of Court
vi) Defamation
vii) Incitement to an offense.

The press faces 25 different restrictions which result in curbing the freedom of the press in Bangladesh. The press code, an exercise of the Bangladesh Press Council, need not be imposed, it must evolve out of professional practice.

Freedom of the press offense both to print and electronic media. The electronic is fully controlled by the state which means the party in power uses in to advance the party's cause rather than for the state cause. The information Minister of the Fifth Parliament said that the electronic media would broadcast or telecast what he would allow. The same was the case for the previous region. The instrument of advertisement also being used very harshly. The Information Minister was on record in the parliament saying that the policy of distribution of government advertisement is based on not circulation alone, but on the publication of objective news. This criteria of
"objective news" was nothing but objectivity was considered by the government. As a result those newspapers which had small readership used to get huge amount of advertisement and advertisement to some of the newspapers were totally stopped as punishment for their refusal to toe the government line.

The worst thing that happened to the freedom of press is the division among the journalist union. The journalists do not see one another's face being divided on the basis of party line and reporting are also done in the same manner. Of course, this has given the owner as well as the government a golden opportunity to dictate terms. The immediate casualty of this division is the job security of journalists. It is obvious, when one is not secured about his job, he cannot express his opinion freely and even fairly. It was true that there were more newspapers than any time before and the government could take the pride in saying that this proved the existence of freedom of press. From a statement of the Bangladesh Press Council Chairman it is known that a total of 1,094 papers of which, 176 dailies, 633 weeklies, 285 monthlies were published in 1990 but from a recent record of the Directorate of Films and Publications, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting shows that 532 newspapers are in circulation in the country.

There are papers attack maliciously by the name of freedom of press personalities or organisations everyday. First an item called 'news' on the front page, next an editorial and then one or more post-editorials and finally the weekend commentary by "the Commentator". The sources are always "reliable source", "knowledge source", "political observer", "informed source", etc. But in the eyes of concerned minister, it was the most objective daily that deserved one of the largest government advertisement support. (Mahiuddin Ahmed, "Press Club: Alternative Jatiya Sangsad", Dhaka Courier, 26 August 1994, p. 65)
There may be various threats to freedom. And all threats spring either from intolerance, or from prejudice or doctrinaire attitude. There is the intolerance of society; there is the blind action of governmental authority; there is also the danger of an exclusive doctrine. The right solution of today may be reactionary tomorrow. Men in power love to advocate; they prefer to demand obedience. It is to be considered that the society is free when facilities for test and investigation are wide. Democracy has to be maintained and guarded by conscious citizens. It is for the press to see that politics does not degenerate into a scramble for power. Long back, Dr. Sachin Sen wrote that if "the party and the press sing in the same tune, free society loses as vigour and soul." (Sachin Sen, The Press and Democracy, Calcutta: General Printers & Publishers, 1957, p. xiii.)

Man must broaden the bound of his freedom, not by filching it from others but by extending domain of freedom. Here the press comes in. It is the duty of the press to fight for the enlargement of human freedom. The struggle has to be carried on, not with emphasis on rights alone but with emphasis on obligation also.

This new technological era has created an unprecedented opportunity for large numbers of broadcasting organisations, both domestically-based and international, to use the television medium. Millions of people are, for the first time, becoming television viewers in their own homes. But the very impact of the satellite revolution has also given rise to a range of new, and sometimes urgent, issues. Throughout the sub-continent, lively debates are in progress about how to respond. These revolve around various questions, such as the need to develop a strategy for dealing with the cultural effects of foreign programmes on a mass indigenous audience; how to license and regulate new regional stations, as well as trying to guarantee standards of quality in their programming.
How to ensure the accountability of international media like CNN or the BBC is a question in the country. Since there would be no control on the news broadcasts of the private media, the government wouldn't be likely to allow freedom in reporting. The deregulation could not be achieved very easily in that case.

Fast changes in the media environment with the application of new technology, both in the print and electronic media many new values are being added. From their the electronic editing to speed of delivery the modern media will greatly enhance the news and information functions. Therefore, there is a need to change which will govern the government's attitude, outline the owners' attitude and above all funnel journalists' attitude. Freedom of press also depends on the existence of democracy and democratic practice and this depends on the socio economic base of the country on which the whole superstructure is made.