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Promoting Pluralism Through Media And Other Social Institutions
With Particular Reference To Bangladesh

By

Fariduddin Ahmad
PROMOTING PLURALISM THROUGH MEDIA AND OTHER SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh itself has aptly been described as the result of pluralism. People of an area wanted to be free from the centre due to its diverse political (and of course economic, social and cultural) objectives and they became free.

Though Bangladesh itself was the proof of political pluralism, it could not continue with that soon after liberation. Coming into being in December 1971, country was declared an one party state by the then President late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and all but four daily newspapers of Dhaka have been banned. The law and order situation, internal volatile and chaotic situation obtaining in the country at that time and taking care of the war ravaged economy were the points put forward for this action but these do not seem to have been accepted by the people.

Situation changed after the assassination of President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. President Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed during his short stay in office removed many obstacles for the newspapers to come out. In fact, it was during the time of President Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) that press in Bangladesh
began to enjoy press freedom. During this time, Govt advertisements were distributed through a cell in the Ministry of Information (earlier known to be the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting) while those of the autonomous corporation were distributed by the Public Relations Departments of the Corporations concerned. This did not last long.

With the death of President Ziaur Rahman came into power the BNP Government of Late President Justice Sattar in late 1981 which was overthrown by a military coup on 24 March 1982 by Mr H.M. Ershad.

During the nine years of autocratic rule, many rules-regulations regarding newspaper publication were introduced. Getting the declaration of a newspaper for a person belonging to the opposition was rather difficult. Bulk of the government advertisement was distributed to the party mouthpiece Dainik Janata. Even advertisements of the sector corporations side by side with the government ones came under the Government for distribution through the Department of Films and Publications. This posed a serious setback for the newspapers as revenue earnings through the advertisements of private enterprises were rather small and Government was the biggest advertiser. Advertisements of government and sector corporations were used as a tool to combat political dissent.
After a mass upsurge, the autocratic regime crumbled down in December 1990 and the democratically elected government of Begum Khaleda Zia came to power in 1991.

Soon the sections of the Special Powers Act of 1974 relating to newspapers were abolished to give the newspapers a free play. Information Minister Barrister Najmul Huda declared that the basis of distribution of government advertisements would be the objectivity in reporting the news.

Number of newspapers swelled and according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) as of May 1992, Bangladesh has a total of about 900 (nine hundred) newspapers and periodicals including over 76 dailies. Most of the newspapers are in Bangla. The mass circulated Bangla dailies are Ittefaq, Inquilab, Dainik Bari, Sangbad, Dainik Bangla, Ajker Kagoz, Sangram, Millat and Khalear. The Bangladesh Observer is the highest circulated English daily followed by the Bangladesh Times, Morning Sun, Daily Star, The Telegraph and the New Nation. Bichitra, Kagoz, Jai Jai Din are some of the leading Bangla weeklies. The major English weeklies are Holiday (the editor is here with us at this seminar), Dialogue, Dhaka Courier and Friday.

The above-mentioned newspapers and weeklies are all published in Dhaka and circulated across the country. Districts also publish their own newspapers.
The present condition of Bangladesh is this that big money and big business houses are founding what they call 'Group of Newspapers' and the institution of 'Chairman, Board of Editors', while the provisions of the Journalists' Wage Board recognise the Editor only.

Excessive number of newspapers and periodicals and their unchecked news stories seem to have been affecting the credibility of the press and in turn hampering pluralism. Press council, is however, looking into the matter.

There is complete press freedom in the country under a democratic government.

There are three news agencies in the country: Bangladesh Sangbad Sangata (BSS), Eastern News Agency (ENA) and the United News of Bangladesh (UNB). BSS is a government-run news agency while ENA and UNB are private enterprise. International news agencies like Reuter, Associated Press (AP), Agence France Presse (AFP), Tass and Xinhua have offices in Dhaka. Radio Bangladesh has six regional stations in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajashahi, Rangpur and Sylhet. It also runs an Externaal Service beamed towards Europe, Middle East, Pakistan, India and Nepal. The daily combined broadcasts of all the six stations of Radio Bangladesh total 92 hours. Dhaka alone
transmits 18 hours of broadcasts. Thirty nine news bulletins and seven news commentaries are put on the air every day.

Television was first introduced in this region in 1964. Since then it has undergone rapid expansion with the setting up of ten relay station at Chittagong, Natore, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Noakhali, Satkhira, Cox's Bazar and Rangamati. Bangladesh Television transmits about 52 hours and 35 minutes of programmes every week. The percentage of local programme is 71 and that of imported programmes 29. The daily transmission time is generally more than 6 hours in a single channel which is extended when necessary. On Fridays there is an extended transmission. Of late programmes of the CNN - the Cable News Network are also being transmitted thorugh BTV daily from 7.30 am to 1.00 pm except Friday.

Radio and Television are state-controlled media in Bangladesh. Soon after the democratically elected Government had taken office, an agreement has been signed with the opposition political parties as to how the television can broadcast the news of the opposition in a bigger way.
Democratic political system and libertarian pluralist press are good no doubt. But with the technological development the press has taken the shape of an industry and in the countries of big Press it occupies quite a formidable position in the industrial arena. For example, the Press in the USA occupies 10th position in order of importance and weight. With the increase in size, readership and advertisement revenue, big business interest has penetrated in this area in all the big pluralist Press of the free world. Only few multinational companies and some big national chains have monopolised the business. The 'free market place of information' has practically been captured by a few people. For instance, about half of the US newspaper industry is owned by 10 companies, of whom 'Thomson Group' and 'News International' are multinationals.

This monopoly and in some cases lack of professional sanctity have given rise to certain dangerous practice in newspaper journalism. According to the British Royal commission report of 1979, the main public allegations against the newspapers are that they encroach upon individual's privacy, they are business holdings of entrepreneurs and are guided by profit motives. Most of their news, views and criticism are directed towards that end. They, therefore, are step-motherly to workers
and labour movement. They are often devoid of ethics and good taste and use sex for business promotion at the cost of the society's morals. Apart from the serious allegation of encroaching upon the individual's privacy, bribing and deception to collect news are also rampant.

Tailoring the news according to the interest of the entrepreneurs, concealing some facts and highlighting others are done from the management side. Unfortunately, the journalists themselves are not always free from these vices. Overplay and distortion of facts, unnecessary emphasis, inaccurate statistics and fictitious stories are often found in newspapers.

In recent times some very sensational news stories in America and elsewhere were found false. The first one by Janet Cooke appear into the 'Washington Post' in its September 28, 1981 issue. It was about a 8-year old heroin addict for which she was selected for the pulitzer prize, the highest journalistic honour in America. Ultimately the story was proved to be hoax.

This has given rise to the Social Responsibility Theory which has not taken the fullest shape as yet. It is, to a great extent, a grafting of new ideas on traditional theory. The functions of the press, according to this theory, are
fundamentally the same as those under libertarian theory. The social responsibility theory like the libertarian theory is an Anglo-American concept. The motto of which is that the Government should not only allow press freedom, it must also actively promote it.

Questions have been raised regarding media's role - what it should or should not do during certain circumstances. It has been assumed that media is an independent entity outside the society. In fact it is a social institution like all other institutions with its benefits and shortcomings.

To my mind, the role of the media is 'to report' what is seen as accurately as possible and try to include the essential details. I will narrate a small newsstory to clarify my point:

It had been reported in the media in Dhaka sometime last year that crooner Runa Laila had been 'suffering' from cancer. The last para of the small news item said, that her elder sister Dina Laila also died of cancer in Karachi a few years ago. But the report did not include the fact that Runa Laila had donated a sum of Taka one lakh (One hundred thousand) for the improvement of the cancer ward of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Allbeit the apprehension of an image-building, this would have inspired other artistes to come forward to help for humanitarian purposes.
In the final analysis, it would be seen that like the Marshal McLuhan’s phrase ‘Media is the Message’, the newspaper or the media is essentially whose money is behind it and secondarily who runs it.

Regarding other social institutions which cater to pluralism, we may mention the names of National Press Club in Dhaka, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists and Journalists Unions in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi in Bangladesh and such organisations outside. In essence, though these are institutions like collective bargaining agents they perform useful functions towards dissemination of pluralist views.

The various committees of the Bangladesh Parliament (Jatiya Sangsad) which are composed of the members of the different political parties and shades of public opinion are also cited to be institutions promoting pluralism.
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