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MONITORING THE WATCHDOGS
THE ROLE OF MEDIA MONITORING MECHANISMS

by

Dr. Usha Vyasulu Reddi
Professor and Director
Audio Visual Research Centre
Osmania University, Hyderabad 500 007

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisation to which she belongs.
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Very little of what any individual knows today is a product of direct experience. Our views of the world, the systems, individuals and objects are a media created second hand reality. Media have displaced religion as the interpreters of the world around us, and have largely defined the pictures we carry in our heads.

Unsuspecting and enthusiastic students of mass communication often find, to their horror, that their notions of media freedom, responsibility, accuracy, objectivity, and idealism, are not much more than ideological baggage which provide the legitimacy for one of the most important social professions in today's world--that of a media person.

And as the media monitor the world for us, defining and describing what become "pictures in our heads", the fundamental questions to be asked remain: how are these monitors (watchdogs) accountable to the society which they monitor? In what way can they be subjected to the scrutiny of a monitor? Depending on the perspective we take, the debate centres around the twin issues of press freedom and responsibility--examined, in our case, from an Indian context.
Press Freedom. Responsibility. Two terms which cause extensive debate around the world, depending upon whom one represents. For media, press freedom is a sacred ideal, to be deified, fought for and protected at any cost. For others such as governments and scholars, for parents and for teachers, responsibility is a quality which media are seen as abusing and neglecting, and even discarding, in the pursuit of circulation, audiences and revenue. If press freedom is a foundation upon which the media build their agenda setting and gatekeeping functions, media monitoring by society is equally critical to an understanding of the effectiveness of media in performing their watchdog functions.

Keeping the Indian context in mind, this paper is an attempt to look at media monitoring mechanisms by proceeding from a look at a) the social context of media institutions and their content, b) existing internal and external regulatory and monitoring mechanisms, and c) evaluating their role as monitors at different levels of analysis.

Some Assumptions

The discussion in this paper is based on certain basic assumptions, spelled out here.

Assumption 1: The terms 'media' and 'press' are used interchangeably, and refer not only to the printed medium but also to the film and the private broadcast industry. A few years ago, one could categorically say that broadcast media, were still well within the ownership and operational control of governments and we
could distinguish clearly between the print and broadcast media. Today, the picture is fuzzy, with private broadcasters using direct broadcast satellite and cable systems to operate parallelly to government controlled broadcast media. Even print media are available on-line for those who have the means and the interest in accessing such trans border data flows. Further, the media industry is no longer clearly demarcated into newspaper houses and radio and television. Cross media ownership and involvement by large media houses and multinationals has changed the media business dramatically. We can no longer make a clear cut distinction between the press and other media, and between media and non media related activities.

Assumption 2: Technology has rendered our traditional understanding of the concepts of media access, availability, passive audiences and democratisation meaningless. The dividing lines between the media content industry, the media service industry (which processes and disseminates information), and the equipment industry which produces the hardware is all but vanishing, and whoever controls the conduit can easily control the content. With such access to media channels and content possible, citizens, have become politically conscious, aware of their rights and actively able to participate in the political process and to articulate their views and opinions. Even the result of a cricket match can produce dramatic consequences, including law and order problems for governments.
Assumption 3: Today, in any medium sized Indian town, available are at least 20 television channels, two or three English and regional language newspapers, and nationally and regionally circulated magazines. We have gone from an era of information scarcity to one of information overload; with such a wide choice that the media consumer has to very selective in terms of patterns of exposure. This has resulted in a highly competitive marketplace of ideas; with all media competing with other leisure time activities and with each other for the individual consumer's attention and readership, viewership, or listenership.

Assumption 4: The existence of a marketplace of ideas is fundamental to an understanding of both the concepts of press freedom and responsibility. Neither concept can exist in a vacuum or without the other. And with increasing media literacy, growing circulations, and a burgeoning media industry, it is the individual reader or viewer who defines and determines both terms--expressed in his or her media choices.

Keeping these assumptions in mind, I turn my attention to the social context of media and media content.

The Social Context of Media

Media do not exist in a vacuum. Operating within a social reality, media have become powerful institutions, with a specified mission and role, and with an equally powerful institutional interest in their own survival.

Media are both a product and a reflection of the history of their own society and of the role they have played in it. They are
national institutions, serving the national interest (which they have to some extent created) and highly sensitive to domestic political, social, and economic realities as much as to the demands of their audiences.

And having played pivotal roles in the history of Indian society, the media have developed to carry the 'ideological baggage' of a concept of morality (that they serve ideals and goals which are somehow above the mundane)—that media have a mission of social auditing to perform and that the political and social health of the society is dependent upon their effective functioning. While to some extent this is indeed the case, because the media in India predates independence, and media role in the independence movements was that of a spearhead.

This, however, does not absolve the media of the accountability to the society which they serve. Media accountability or responsibility is written into the countries' constitutions or may emerged from practice, or through the adoption of Western definitions of journalism with which our students are trained.

No editor worth his salt is going to disagree with the belief that only a responsible media institution can perform their given watchdog function in a society. Nor will any editor deny the overpowering influence of the social context of India upon the content of the media. Goonasekhara (1992)' has tried to develop a paradigm of what constitutes the social context within which these functions must be developed.
The manifestation of both media functions, i.e. gatekeeping and agenda setting, is in the news content of media. In turn, news (information) for both the producer and the recipient is a product or social construction of several "screens" or "filters" through which it is constructed. At the core is the general understanding of news values, prominence, proximity, timeliness, objectivity, fairness, accuracy etc. The filters consist of the individual social psychological frame, an organisational environment, and a social context. Goonasekhara further argues that to understand news production and its reception,
we should place it within the social political context from which it derived its meaning both at the production stage and at the reception stage. We cannot understand it by plucking it out of the social system of which it is a part."

McQuail has sketched the position of the media organisation and those working within it as making decision at the centre of a field of different constraints, demands or attempted uses of power and influence.

This is a representation of an organic institution. The pressures, constraints, and demands are real and not necessarily limiting. They may even open up alternative sources of income or protection for the task of the organisation; some may cancel or balance out each other. McQuail points out that lack of external pressure would probably indicate social marginality or
insignificance. No media organisation could survive for long in such a situation.

Because of the social importance of their function, media persons and institutions see freedom of the press as instrumental to the effective operation of a media system with the social context. Freedom, they argue, will enable the widest and most rational application of the news values of truth and accuracy, objectivity, independence from vested interests, fairness, respect for law, moral decency and good taste.

If freedom of the press is a fundamental prerequisite for the existence of responsible media functioning to serve the ideals of the moral mission, the social issues upon which the controversial debate is centred around are: concentration and monopoly, news quality, security and authority of the state and social order, morals and decency, cultural quality, autonomy and cultural integrity. Monitoring of media performance is the only method we have to matching the ideals to actual reality. This is where regulatory mechanisms, internal and external assume importance.

**Media Monitoring Mechanisms**

Factors which play an important role in influencing media content can be personal and institutional. Personal factors such as the communicator's characteristics, professional backgrounds and experiences, professional roles and ethics effect media content as much as personal attitudes, values and beliefs and power within the organisation. If one adds these characteristics to what is
perceived as the "moral mission of the media", an even more complex picture emerges.

Even given that the moral ideals of media can never be achieved in the absolute, these are ideals which current Indian mediapersons find impossible even to aspire for. General news values such as those mentioned above are relative to each individual media institution and individual working within it. The existing organisational set up, as media statistics show, consists of concentration of ownership of media, cross media ownership and monopoly by media barons, the nexus between business, politics and media with the last existing merely to further the interests of the first two. General news values are influenced and even replaced by the publishers' personal political and business interests. The moral mission of media takes second place.

Accepting the general importance of the above mentioned factors in the functioning of any media system or institution, let us turn our attention to internal and external media monitoring mechanisms, the former being formal and informal mechanisms set up by the medium itself, the latter being laws, regulatory bodies, codes of ethics, etc.

Internal monitoring mechanisms. Two kinds of monitoring mechanisms can be easily identified: the individual and the institutional. And each can play a pivotal role.

The character, integrity, and professionalism of the individual media person in an organisation--from the reporter, sub editor, to the editor and publisher/owner--is perhaps the best
media monitoring mechanism available in any social system. This would involve internalising an ethical code which basically implies refusing all perks and freebees offered by publicity agencies and government. Barring a few media institutions which discourage prohibit their employees from accepting any favours from outside, there are very few instances of this form of personal integrity among media persons in Asia.

To put it very simply, how can a media person who benefits from government subsidised housing/housing or vehicle loan, from government prescribed norms of pay ever be free to undertake the kind of thorough and critical investigation and analysis? How can the media person who has been appointed, not on account of his/her professionalism but as a result of favours asked and given ever be independent? How can a media person who curries favour in order to move up the professional ladder ever be free? At least in South Asia, I do not believe that individual integrity and professionalism as a media monitoring mechanism is doing well.

The best method in which an ethical code can be maintained by journalists is when they become professionals, in terms of educational levels, qualifications, and incomes which keep the journalist from being tempted by the many offers given to them. It is unreal, even unfair, to expect them to have a moral standard when their qualifications are inadequate to the tasks they have to fulfil, their salaries are very low, job security exists in name only, and they are coerced by their insecurities into behaving
unprofessionally, especially when moral standards are taking a battering in a transitional social system.

Institutional mechanisms consists of a variety of methods; from editorial committees which rigourously scrutinise the contents of their own media to the OMBUDSMAN, a concept being applied by some press institutions such as The Washington Post or the Times of India. The ombudsman at the Washington Post is an independent person, appointed on a non-renewable, non cancellable contract to monitor the contents of the newspaper. A senior professional, appointed from outside the system, reviews the contents on a daily basis to evaluate the newspaper's adherence to the principles of professional journalism. The OMBUDSMAN can be a person whom both the newspaper and the audience can trust, who can act as an internal monitor, a person whom any individual who feels aggrieved by the newspaper's content can approach and expect both a fair and a thorough examination of the grievance. A second method of internal monitoring (which can also be made public) is for the medium to have a "mission statement" or a statement of goals and objectives, with the editorial position of the newspaper or television station made public from time to time. Irrespective of what this statement says, it is then possible for both the employees and the general public to measure performance of the medium against its stated objectives. This is essential because a proper evaluation of performance, or a proper monitoring of content can only be done if one knows what the aims, goals and objectives of the medium are. The mission statement serves the dual purpose
a programme which went off the air soon after it commenced, possibly because the print media did not relish the contents of the reviews.

Such reviews by peer groups would go a long way in monitoring the media and in raising the standards of journalism in India.

**External Monitoring Mechanisms.** There exist a variety of general and specialised social and legal institutions and instruments which constitute the environment in which the media operate. Operating at an international, regional and national level, and including both governmental and non-governmental organisations, these institutions or instruments are both general, e.g. for human rights, freedom of information, protection of intellectual property. Often covering a wide range of social issues and although, not specifically designed to address media, these protocols contain pertinent references to both the content and the infrastructure of communication.

Protection and/or promotion of human rights are covered by a wide range of instruments, from treaties, declarations, resolutions and recommendations; while freedom of information is covered by instruments such as the Freedom on Information Acts. Protection of intellectual property (a specially sensitive area in today's international relations) refers to those instruments that regulate the protection of industrial property, of copyrights, and neighbouring rights.

Specialised instruments are designed to cover communication issues in particular. There are specific instruments addressing
general mass media policy; broadcasting, film and the press; advertising, marketing, consumer information, and public relations as also specific laws and protocols dealing with the various aspects of telecommunications.

A number of issues have often been raised in relation to the many regulations which affect the functioning of media. For instance, the debate around the right to access to information (freedom on information) centres around issues of cost, technology and privacy, and the national security factor.

In the case of satellite communication, any number of issues emerge. For example, there are two stages in any DBS system—the uplink, i.e. the transmission of a signal from an earth station to the satellite; and the down link—the transmission of the signal from the satellite to receivers.

The latter is generally considered broadcasting. Whenever we speak of 'the cultural invasion from the skies' or of cultural imperialism, we are referring to the content received across borders and over which the polity has little or no control in terms of monitoring and/or regulation. The former, the uplink is the more contentious issue because of issues of control, revenues from advertising, copyright, and the possibility that the uplink and down link parties are not the same or residing in the same countries—therefore, not subject to same regulatory instruments.

Other than the formal instruments of media monitoring, one can also examine the role which social institutions such as consumer groups, voluntary agencies, courts, and even teaching and research
institutions could play as external media monitoring mechanisms. For instance, consumer groups can approach consumer fora, and consumer courts for addressing issues relating to standards in media content; researchers can study the manifest content of newspapers to determine the amount of coverage given to various issues and the bias—the extent to which the media are performing their gatekeeping and agenda setting functions.

**How well are the monitoring mechanisms working?**

The existence of internal and external media monitoring mechanisms is an accepted part of the work of the media. Yet the acceptance of such mechanisms is hesitant, the functioning inadequate and media professionals are sometimes resentful of these mechanisms which they see as a direct threat to the freedom of expression and to their perception of the 'moral mission of the media.'

Taking the core of the media organisation as our first level of analysis, a study of the background of journalists working in Indian media organisation shows great variation in professional standards, incomes and benefits packages. While established national media maintain very high standards, the same cannot be said for the small newspapers in regional languages or in the rural areas where the journalists are not qualified and are low paid. Stevenson (1995) has argued that "ethics in reporting and coverage has taken a severe beating owing to the vast network of stringers....the darker side is that these stringers have become centres of power without responsibility in their respective
areas...These stringers are being patronised by local politicians, police officials, and lumpen elements for favourable coverage."

Mention has already been made of the organisational climate in which many a media person works, the second level of analysis. A large number of newspapers owned by either businessmen or politicians to further their own interests ensure that the quality of journalism takes a subservient position to their primary interests. The rapid turnover in senior positions is reflective of such a situation, and to some extent the decline of the Indian Express as one of the top line newspaper institutions is a direct result of family squabbling over the vast business empire left by the late proprietor of the newspaper chain.

The third level of analysis relates to external regulatory mechanisms and instruments. Although the mass media in India continue to enjoy a degree of freedom which would be the envy of several countries on the subcontinent, there is a deviation between the existing regulatory mechanisms as laws and codes written and in actual practice. While too often the focus is on the way in which government has manipulated and interpreted laws to interfere with the functioning of the media, it is also worth noting that regulatory instruments such as the Copyright Act, the Cinematography Act, the Laws of Defamation, or even the Broadcasting Code, are extremely difficult to implement. An individual seeking redress under any of these laws would be compelled to give up out of frustration at the complexity of legal
action, the slow pace of justice, or the impossibility of proving mala fides.

Over the last few years, however, the courts have been actively intervening to monitor the activities of media. For instance, the debate over the controversial film Bandit Queen carried out in courts and covered by all media, shows the concern of the judicial system in issues relating to media content.

The Supreme Court's involvement in the issue of uplink facilities for coverage of the recent World Cup Cricket also showed the judiciary's concern in issues relating to media laws as they exist in India today.

There is no binding code covering the press in India today. It is one of the tasks of the Press Council to "build up a code of conduct for newspapers, news agencies, and journalists in accordance with high professional standards". There is much discussion on the subject, with some sections of the society expressing the view that some code of conduct must be formulated for print media. However, the Press Council, by publishing a digest of cases adjudicated by it over the years, has hoped that such a code will emerge rather than be formulated. Mention must be made that adjudication by the Press Council carries more moral than legal weight--leading to the oft heard argument that the Press Council has no teeth to punish erring print media.

Public interest litigation has been one way of monitoring media content--and although this method has been widely used by media to expose corruption in public life--there have been
instances of individuals and organisations approaching the courts for decisions in media content, as for instance, both the Bandit Queen case and the case of Tamas. There are also instances of individuals approaching the courts for redress or to ensure that alternate views are also given an opportunity for expression in media. The potential of using this method of monitoring the media has yet to be explored fully.

Of greater concern today is the monitoring of broadcast, especially private satellite to cable television. Since production of programmes may be done in one country, the uplinking of programmes from another, and the downlinking to receivers in a third, the satellite to cable systems escape the regulatory mechanisms of either the country of origin, transmission, or reception. And the content of the satellite cables gives serious cause for concern—since codes relating to advertising, obscenity, are routinely violated in the content of these media.

A disturbing trend, result from media monitoring is worth noting. In an atmosphere of escalating violence in Punjab and Kashmir, media institutions were the victims of intimidation and violence from armed gangs of terrorists who have expressed displeasure over coverage and views in the media. In extreme cases, this has led to the assassination of editors (Hind Samachar).

At the final level of analysis, the internationalisation of media activities, whether in ownership patterns or content, brings into focus the work carried out by intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO, ITU, or WIPO, and non governmental bodies such as Amnesty
International; the International Organisation of Journalists, to mention a few. In specialised ways, but with a significant voice, these non governmental bodies are highlighting cases of abuse of freedoms of both the governments and the media in various parts of the world. A world public opinion acts as a moral force compelling individuals and institutions to reexamine the ways in which they are functioning and the yeoman role of these organisations cannot be underestimated.

In Conclusion

Writing this paper has been a very thought provoking experience for me for the simple reason that, in addition to being a teacher and student of communication, I am also in the business of producing media content. As a person who has to supervise the production of educational television material, I find that all the freedoms and regulatory mechanisms are applicable to the work I do. And whenever a decision is taken on the way in which a programme is produced, the features which are highlighted or downplayed, I am aware that the evaluation of a programme will be on its manifest content and production quality. Few will take into account all the (sometimes heartbreaking) thinking, research and discussion which has gone into the production and most of the time the criticism will be on the basis of ignorance rather than an understanding of either the content or the medium.

I am reminded of Noam Chomsky's work on the media as expressed in his book and video, *Manufacturing Consent*, which argues that media form part of a large superstructure out to manipulate public
opinion to suit vested interests. Chomsky has an ideological stance, but I have found his methodology to be weak simply because it does not base the argument on an understanding of how media operate on a day to day basis.

Which is why I conclude that media education is perhaps the best monitoring mechanism. It is necessary to educate people as much on the way media work, on the way in which media decisions are made and on the forces which act as restraints on the media so that a more informed discussion of media role in society, and an understanding of the necessity of freedom to ensure a responsible role is spread among the specialist and the lay public.
ENDNOTES


3. Ibid. p. 11


6. "My eyes are wide open, like an owl: Seshan" Deccan Chronicle, April 20,1996 p. 19

7. See UNESCO: World Communication Report, 1990 for a comprehensive listing of regulatory instruments which relate to communication institutions.

8. For instance, the volume Mass Media Laws and Regulations in India brought out by AMIC contains all the regulatory instruments which govern mass communication in India. The volume, as stated by the author, itself is not exhaustive, but more indicative, giving the reader an insight as to the depth and range of external regulations on mass communication in India.