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The Influence Of Policies And Government On Ethical Media Practice

By

M J Akbar
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by M.J. Akbar

"The Influence of Policies and Government on Ethical Media Practice": There are five different variables in that theme, at the least, and a million permutations and combinations that could emerge from the interaction. To begin with, what kind of government are we talking about? To pretend that a similar kind of democracy is operating in all the countries of South Asia would be decidedly optimistic. We are, in fact, currently undergoing a particularly scummy phase of democratic behaviour on the old subcontinent, since all the governments, barring Bhutan, can claim the legitimacy of adult franchise and free elections. But this has hardly been the substantive reality, and in nations like Pakistan and Bangladesh the media has learnt that it must never become so adventurous as to invite the wrath of institutions like the armed forces which have shown little hesitation to bend history to their will. If Prime Ministers in Islamabad and Dhaka have to operate a Third Eye from the back of their heads to forestal an abrupt termination of their power, you can hardly blame an editor for keeping channels open to the right level of uniforms. Democratic behaviour is much more than the conduct of elections. Newspapers know that, which is why they are far more eager to condemn a Prime Minister than to berate a colonel.

This is perhaps the most appropriate moment to point out that vested interests of the known establishment are not the only threat to the existence of a free press, or to "Ethical Media Practice" as the organisers have rather quaintly put it. India has much to be embarrassed about these days, but at least on one score, its record is unmatched: freedom and democracy. But a strange paradox is building in Indian democracy, where the exercise of elections is breeding a potential enemy of free media. India has seen government pervert freedom of the press, as in 1975 when the Emergency who imposed. On occasion less draconian governments have attempted to legislate against the excesses of media self-indulgence, or, indeed, blatant partisanship. Thankfully, each time the baby has been rescued from the bathwater. But in recent times, Indian democracy has strengthened rightwing forces which have proudly compared themselves with Adolf Hitler, and targeted not only the minority communities with murder, rape and wanton destruction but also that section of media which has dared to object to such hooliganism. This is not an unprecedented phenomenon. Hitler himself won elections. But it is a complex phenomenon in India and perhaps requires a separate discussion. What happens to "Ethical Media Practice" when it is threatened not by government
but by private armies during allegiance to warlords with no commitment to any democratic values?

And before we examine the relationship between government pressure and editorial independence, we media practitioners might want to pause and consider whether journalists undisturbed by any powermongers are necessarily always paragons of virtue. At one level, the temptation to exploit passion-provoking lies during moments of crisis like communal riots, is powdered too with almost shameless consistency by a large tribe of owner-editors, who virtually instruct reporters to obtain bylines by manufacturing lies. Very widely-circulated non-English newspapers in India indulge in this crime, and some English papers have occasionally joined this game too. At another level is the temptation of owners to convert their newspapers into weapons with which to bludgeon enemies. The newspaper has not only become the most effective ally in corporate warfare, but also a tool for thinly disguised partisan propaganda. In just the past few days I have seen on the front page of a leading English newspaper headlines making a charge against X or Y or Z, whereas the copy said absolutely nothing to warrant these headlines. Clearly the editor gave pre-judged headlines which were later totally incompatible with copy, but no one on the desk had the courage to change the editor’s headlines. What form of ethics should we consider this? The only point one might make it that ego-partisanship is an international disease of journalism.

To return to our principal theme: we have an interesting conjunction in the title. It is not the influence of Policies of Government on Ethical Media Practice lent the influence of Policies and government. This distinction and difference is necessary, for the two are not the same. There is the influence of policies, and the influence of government, and they take their own shapes.

Governments in India, being denied the freedom to simply bludgeon editors into hapless submission, have not necessarily always retired hurt. They have used the wealth of political and bureaucratic imagination to create pools of pressure which would make newspapers vulnerable. It was not simply the fact that the Press Act which still operates was first devised in the decade after the 1857 Mutiny and polished up in successive eras to meet the demands of a threatened imperialism. Nationally, free India introduced amendments, but not so many as you might imagine. It was the hangover of the past which allowed censorship, for instance, to be so easily imposed in 1975.

There were other techniques brought into play. The newsprint policy, for instance. But there is in fact no longer much need to dwell upon these factors because significant changes in policy over the last two years have defanged many of the provisions. The decanalisation of newsprint import, for instance, did as much as anything else to remove a major source of government pressure on the conduct of newspaper operations. Similarly, the inclusion
of print technology into the open general licence category, again a decision of a congress government, allowed Indian media to enter a new era of growth and expansion, enabling the smaller newspaper houses in particular to multiply their reach through the application of cost-effective communication systems. The impact therefore of the spirit of liberalisation now underway in India has been positive on the media industry.

It is comforting to report that all this has not turned the Indian print media soft on the government. It retains and continues to protect its independence with a sustained vigour.

One is even tempted to suggest that no government is probably in a position to imprison the media anymore. The world has changed too much for any kind of authoritarianism or pseudo-authoritarianism to succeed. Governments no longer inspire the fear - or, I daresay even the respect - they once did. Politics as a profession and government as an institution has been devalued sufficiently in the last decade.

The impact therefore of government on Ethical Media Practice, as distinct from Government Policy, has also weakened. To explain a little. During the Emergency, for example, it was not only the official policy of government which held media under thrall; the sense of terror personally generated by a few individuals played more than its part in creating an atmosphere of terror. Only those who have faced the specific bullying and viciousness of the powerful know how pernicious the use of raw power can be in sending suitable "signals" to the media. Everyone has some skeleton or the other; proprietors are not very different from other businessmen in their attitude to tax laws, for instance. Governments ensure rewards to the "politically correct" and get very legal with those less polite. On an individual level, journalists get the benefit of housing etc., for being suitably friendly to particular power brokers. The correlation between generosity and ethics can be as insidious as the equation between fear and ethics.

A major reason for the growing impotence of governments, at least as far as their ability to manipulate media is concerned, is technology. I will leave this thought in skeletal form in this brief paper, but I hope that this is an area which we consider in some depth in our discussions. A select and specialised group like ours, at such a seminars, will understand immediately how the dramatic arrival of the satellite in the sky, and its astounding ability to filter into any home without the permission of governments, and without any respect to traditional boundaries, has simply defanged the authority of local powers. It is virtually impossible now to protect the news of the destruction of a Babri mosque or the siege of the Hazrathal shrine, or any other major incident, from being reported by voices and cameras which have no allegiance to local authority. And this is only the beginning of the technology revolution; its consequences of the nature of the print media, for instance, have not been fully appreciated. But no media is coldly neutral; we know that. If governments do not control these satellite
companies, it does not follow that no one controls them. This seminar must provide some time for the emerging concerns of the age of transition in a spirit of empathy, not antipathy; but with its eyes also open, and not lulled to sleep by a new hypnosis.

A second point on which, I hope, we will dwell. The real danger to independent journalism these days might come not from the abilities or dis-abilities of any government, whether in Delhi or Dhaka, Colombo or Islamabad. It might come from something altogether different: a willing desire of journalists to be on the correct side of issues of critical concern, particularly those issues which have a direct impact on national survival. Indian and Pakistan journalists, for instance, take absolutely predictably opposite lines on any matter relating to Kashmir. The particular merits of any incident gets totally drowned in the seas of patriotism showing around on both sides of the border. It would be most interesting to consider the relationship between media ethics and nationalism. On how Sri Lanka media treats the civil war in the Tamil areas; on how Indian media treats Kashmir; on how Pakistani media reports the same story; on how Bangladeshi media responds so promptly to any inspired bashing of Delhi, and so on and so forth. This is going to be prickly, and perhaps not necessarily pleasant. It is much nicer to blame governments for all the ills and take credit for all that goes well. But a seminar by and for professionals of South Asia will not have served its purpose if it does not permit some space for introspection.