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Watchdog Role Of Media

By

Felix Abisheganaden
SEMINAR: MASS MEDIA AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

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PAPER: WATCHDOG ROLE OF MEDIA

BY

Mr. Felix Abisheganaden
Corporate Director
Before discussing the watchdog role of media, I would like to stress three fundamental points.

**FIRST**: There are two distinct ways at looking at information. In Asia, news is looked upon as something that has an educational function. In the West, information is projected as a photograph of facts and events.

**SECOND**: For many years -- before Third World countries were given a chance to express themselves -- the cry was for a free flow of news. Today, the cry is for a balanced flow of news.

**THIRD**: When we talk of the freedom of the Press, we actually mean Freedom and Responsibility of the Press. Not freedom OR responsibility.

Having made those points, let us take a quick look at the state of the Press around the world. In Asia, only the Press in India, Japan and to a lesser extent, Hong Kong, is free of Government restrictions, says a report published by the International Press Institute. The countries which do have a free press are a dwindling minority in the international community.

We know that not very long ago, eight newspapers in the Lebanon were closed down. In Latin America, violations of Press freedom are the worst in the world. (Again I'm quoting the IPI report). In Africa, the Press suffers from Government restriction or intimidation.

In Eastern Europe, State Control of media remains rigid. The IPI report says that nations controlling their own media had failed in a bid at the Unesco Assembly in Nairobi in 1976 to extend State control beyond international frontiers and put constraints on the flow of information to and from countries which have a free press. But the fight is not over. The issue will come up again when the Unesco Assembly meets in Paris later this month.

In its watchdog role, I think we can safely say that the Press has come to recognise the importance of separating news and editorial policy. This has brought about a situation in which the truth and accuracy of the printed fact increasingly is sought as a goal of the best journalism.
During World War II came the development of a concept we now refer to as "Interpretive reporting." This was a recognition that if the newspaper is to perform its job in a democracy -- where things are eventually decided by the people -- the reader has to have a better understanding of public affairs. The newsman had to present a sort of "scoreboard" to provide explanatory material, definitions and background.

It became necessary for reporters not to talk vaguely about international financial and monetary problems, but to say to the reader: "This means that..." As one Commission on the Freedom of the Press commented: "It is no longer enough to report the fact truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the fact."

We have heard a lot about media having to be objective in its watchdog role. Editors in Asean I am sure realise that strict "objectivity" not only could lead to serious abuses, but that a newspaper would not be doing its job if it merely gave "one-or-two dimensional reporting." A newspaper must add a third dimension -- and that is MEANING. Today's news with tomorrow's meaning.

"Objectivity" perhaps is an unfortunate word in that it describes a broad goal or ideal -- that is to write news without any bias or expression of opinions of the report or editor, as opposed to the subjective news, which would be controlled and presumably distorted by the ideas and views of the reporter and editor.

We recognise today that any account of any event or situation must be affected by the observer's peculiar abilities, his background, and, perhaps, even his physical point of view, perhaps even prejudices of which he may be unaware. Indeed, it would be difficult for any human being to be completely free of prejudices, or predispositions.

A reporter in any news situation is confronted with a great amount of detail. There usually are countless facts on which he can draw. The mere process of deciding which "facts" to report is a subjective act.
To judge if a particular newspaper is in fact performing a watchdog function we need to ask this question: Is it a good community conscious newspaper? For the answer we need to look into four factors:

1. Accuracy
2. Responsibility
3. Integrity
4. Leadership.

Let's take each point. ... For accuracy, a newspaper must:

* Exert maximum effort to print the truth in all news situations;
* Strive for completeness and objectivity
* Guard against carelessness, bias or distortion by either emphasis or omission;
* Correct promptly errors of fact.

Point No. 2: To show its responsibility, a newspaper must:

* Select, edit and display news on the basis of its significance, interest and its genuine usefulness to the public;
* Edit news affecting public morals with candor and good taste and avoid an imbalance of sensational, preponderantly negative or merely trivial news.
* Accent, when possible, a reasonable amount of news which illustrates the values of compassion, self-sacrifice, heroism, good citizenship and patriotism.
* Clearly define sources of news, tell the reader when competent sources cannot be identified — and background with the facts, statements which the newspaper knows to be inaccurate.
* Uphold the right of free speech, respect rights of privacy and serve the public by helping to protect all rights and privileges guaranteed by law.

* Instruct its staff members to conduct themselves with dignity and decorum.

Point No. 3: To show integrity, a newspaper must:

* Honestly and fairly select and edit its news content to provide impartial treatment of disputed issues and thorough and dispassionate handling of controversial subjects.

* Respect honest conflicting opinions of disagreement.

* Label as editorial its own views or expressions of opinion and provide a forum for the exchange of pertinent comment and criticism, especially if it is in conflict with the newspaper's editorial point of view.

Point No. 4 -- to demonstrate leadership, a newspaper must:

* Stimulate and vigorously support public officials, private groups and individuals to increase the good works and eliminate the bad in the community.

* Serve as a constructive critic of Government, provide leadership for necessary reforms or innovations and expose any wrong-doing in office or any misuse of public power.

* Oppose selfish and unwholesome interests regardless of their size or influence.

If media meets all the requirements I have listed it would indeed be performing its watchdog role.

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