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**Responsible Reporting And Journalistic Autonomy**

**By**

**Rex de Silva**

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MEDIA WORKSHOP ON COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN SRI LANKA

Organised by

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RESPONSIBLE REPORTING AND JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY

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## RESPONSIBLE REPORTING AND JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY

By Rex De Silva

As a Journalist who had been literally baptised in Printer's Ink and remained to the so called Black Art for over two decades, I would accept the subjects under review with a sense of guarded ambivalence.

Responsible reporting and journalistic autonomy are quaint terms devoid of an absolute or clear definition.

The fact is that such jargon are frequently used by those outside the Fourth Estate to give us either a guilt complex or an undeserved egoistic boost. And whether we like it or not they are accepted subjects of serious study in the realms of communications.

Indeed, Sri Lanka today, with its mixed bag of media autonomy provides an ideal backdrop for the academician and the researcher for their respective insight.

Instead of trying to unravel or rather entangle myself in the ongoing polemics on what responsible reporting is or responsibility to whom and to what degree etc., I would rather try to explain what I think and believe in this respect.

The very definition of 'responsibility' is so varied and wide apart: in the same way Sigiriya Rock is to a mooncrater.

One positive way of tackling the issue is to find a relatively convincing answer to the regular complaint one hears at the Editor's chair about irresponsible reporting.

Those wielding the brickbats often are the politicians; the state officials; and pressure groups usually commercial, even those in organised crime but seldom the general public. If the readers find their newspaper irresponsible they will hardly subscribe to it thus ensuring its early demise.

The common factor governing responsibility in the media is the public at large; infact their basic opinions matter to a large extent.

Some cardinal rules governing responsible reporting in a free and independent media is objectivity and tact. Things like public or national interest or human interest in orderly presentation of information follow next.

Regrettably these ideals are seldom achieved though every reporter worth his or her salt is determined to do so. Reasons for the lapses are numerous though hardly justifiable and least comprehensible.

In most third world countries responsible reporting is subject to multifarious impediments mainly from the Establishment.

Repressive regimes treat the media as a propaganda tool for its survival or a servile agency to disseminate its Bulls and Edicts to the masses: A kind of an extended government gazette. Journalistic responsibility begins and ends in the state media conglomerates, where they enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the bureaucracy and petty officialdom. Journalists work like automatons or robots programmed to serve one specific responsibility or should we say autocracy. It has been noticed that such media practitioners feel committed to the task of educating and informing the powerless on behalf of the powerful.

In contrast to this is the journalist entrusted with 'responsible reporting' in a relatively free or totally independent media. Being responsible to their own sacred professional norms these men and women act as watchdogs of the powerless against the powerful. This is the beginning and end of their responsibility.

I would prefer <sup>to</sup> delve more into the work of a free and independent journalist than into the restricted one for obvious reasons.

Just as much as we admire marvellous achievements of this breed of watchdog cum crusader of public well being it is time we did some soul searching too vis a vis responsibility.

Mainly due to the adversarial one tract mind of some reporters the public tend to become disillusioned about their role. The reason for this stems from the fact that the men and women who control news or whom we call the 'gatekeepers' often lack a wide ranging training or experience. This is very true of the press in the so called third world countries due to the lack of facilities and funds-for training. Compounding the crisis is the most virulent brain drain syndrome, afflicting such media.

Another reason that generates frustration among the readers is journalistic inertia and cliches coupled with a mindless arrogance that have seeped into the profession.

When the 'gatekeepers' have a rather shallow judgement of news the public who more often than not are intelligent and literate will naturally react accordingly. Therefore a slide in standards will ultimately lead to a grave Credibility Crisis for the reporters as well as the organisations they serve.

Newsroom mismanagement could be more disastrous than mere irresponsible reporting. Unfortunately this happens everyday in almost every media outfit in the world.

Coming back to responsibility and objectivity in reporting I would like to speak a few words on the new development known as investigative journalism which is making tremendous impact and inroads in relatively free and democratic States of the third world too.

The "Watergate models" seems to have given a new spark of life to the newspeople. Reporters instead of waiting for news stories are going after them. They feel responsible. Yet some fall short of objectivity: particularly those who believe they are born police detectives. Those who resort to much-raking for sake of sensationalism or public scandal have also generated counter productive responses.

Investigative reporting has its own advantages in serving the public. But instead of seeking to destroy the Establishment the investigative reporters will get the better of his professionalism by exposing the faults of the system with a genuine intent of renovating or repairing it.

Investigative reporting is highly responsible and at the same time difficult. It demands a high level of confidentiality of the sources. Prosecutors and the Establishment itself will make an extra effort to force them to disclose their sources. The reporters must therefore be able to withstand the pressures.

Having said that I would move into the second part of my presentation.

A Journalist's right to autonomy flows from the basic commitment to seek the truth. But at the same time a Journalist must be free from political or commercial hindrance; above all from censorship, if autonomy is to be upheld for the greater good of the people at large.

Journalists are seldom free of these multiple interferences. The Sri Lankan example too bears testimony in a relative sense.

At the same time the Press cannot and should not have double standards on the question of autonomy. It must not resist public scrutiny in the same way it claims rights to problems and review everything and everyone on behalf of the public.

In Sri Lanka we have a Press Council while the journalists are obliged to follow a code of ethics. There has been no major cause for concern in recent times, although there were initial apprehensions over certain provisions in that law.

Various laws and administrative regulations have been used even in Sri Lanka by successive regimes to curb journalistic autonomy and censor the press in general. Even today despite the liberalised trade policies the import of newsprint is controlled, through a quota system.

Although I prefer not to elaborate local examples, I would wish to cite a recent move by the authorities to introduce laws to compel newspapers to reveal the identity of writers behind pseudonyms. The media crusaded against it and the government refrained from pursuing the issue.

At the same time the government recently proved its bona fides of upholding the rights of a free press as guaranteed in the constitution when a certain cabinet minister directed police detectives to question the Editor of the SUN and give reasons why he wrote an editorial decrying the deterioration in public service.

The police also demanded the address of a reader who wrote a "letter to the editor" on the same subject. Following a vehement protest by that paper the President ordered the detectives to call off the probe and also set guidelines to his Ministers when dealing with the free press.

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