

MEDIA ETHICS (IN RELATION TO DISASTERS AND THEIR EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT)

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It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be here and share the views on the subject “Media Ethics in relation to the disasters and their effective management.”

From time immemorial, human civilization has faced both natural and man made disasters in one form or the other. The earliest reference to it can perhaps be the deluge faced in the times of Noah and from his ark we may draw the lessons for preparedness for meeting the nature’s fury, being an ancient account of ‘disaster management’.

The Press Council has been working on this topic of vital importance for about a decade in collaboration with National Institute of Disaster Management. The first discussion on Disaster Management and the Role of Media was held on 16th November, 2000 on the National Press Day when the Seminar was greatly benefited by the guidance of the then President of India, Dr. K R Narayanan. Subsequently, a Workshop was

* Lecture by Mr. Justice G.N. Ray, Chairman, Press Council of India on ‘Media Ethics (in relation to disasters and their effective management) on August 12, 2008 at NIDM, New Delhi at 10.00 a.m. on “Role of Media in Disaster Management”

organized on August 4, 2005 to facilitate the process of interaction with the media *vis-a vis* the Disaster Management Perspective, the coverage of the events by the media at the time of disaster and their expectation and problems.

The concern over preparedness to face disaster is not new. Way back in 1950s, the first Prime Minister Pandit Nehru had personally taken up the issue with all the Chief Ministers of the country and his observation is as relevant today as it was then and I quote “Indeed, every calamity is a challenge to our nationhood.....and a nation is ultimately judged by the way the challenge is accepted.”

The Indian history teaches us the use of mass media for awakening consciousness of the people to fight against the outbreak of plague, cyclone, flood, earthquake, famines etc. Mahatma Gandhi wrote extensively in the Indian Opinion, the Harijan, the Amrit Bazar Patrika and several other newspapers about the methods to prevent plague and face natural calamities as a cohesive unit. For centuries man believed that we cannot avoid or avert the providence.

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“Whatever is ordained cannot be erased.”

This fatalistic mindset prompted to negative response to disaster management because we were inclined to accept the course of events as ordained and only decided to wait for the next. Things are, however, changing due to scientific reasonings, better capacity, better networking, better resource mobilisation and a greater awareness. Towards the goal of all comprehensive disaster management we all should stand committed. We will only court disaster if we do not prepare ourselves to fight it.

The UN World Disaster Reduction Campaign launched in 1998, underlined the necessity of enlisting the media as working partners in promoting natural disaster prevention measures worldwide.

Information is the basis of all the activities of the individuals and the society. Therefore, it will be wise if we address the following questions:-

When the individual, society, country or the mankind is faced with disaster, whether natural or man made, can the media come to the rescue or minimize the damage in any way? What role media should play at such crisis? What are the guidelines, which media should follow?

It is said that a free press and electronic media is the best guarantee against disaster. The media plays a critical role in shaping peoples' responses in times of crises. Therefore, it has a great preventive role in informing and preparing people against all calamities.

The media today has at their disposal potent methods and instruments that can educate and enable the people in performing their duty to the nation effectively, intelligently and specially in times of crisis.

With the advent of information revolution, information can reach the people instantly, extensively and effectively.

The disasters are both natural and man-made. Natural disasters in general may be beyond human control and only the effects or impact of such disasters can be reduced by making appropriate efforts.

However, natural disasters may also be the result of careless human activities, and are therefore preventable. Pollution, environmental

problems, global warming, floods, epidemics, nuclear and chemical disasters are the examples which can be attributed to irresponsible human activities and if effective, appropriate and timely prevention is adopted, such disasters can be averted. It is rightly said, “Prevention is better than cure”.

Under such situations media plays an active and important role in disseminating information causing awareness to public at large which will prompt them not to indulge in unwise and irresponsible activities and also to prevent others from indulging in such improper activities. But it should be ensured that the information is backed by strong data base.

Technical advances, especially in information and communication arena, have brought human beings closer to one another around the globe. The information from any corner of the world can be accessed by just a click of the mouse to give advance warning of any impending calamity. For instance, the time gap in the last Tsunami, if properly understood world over, could have been utilized to prevent widespread damage.

Another important aspect is the positive role that the media can play in normal situation to spread awareness amongst the general public. While projecting the facts, it can educate and guide people about the effects of the various disasters and calamities and educating them about the Dos and Don'ts, by identifying and focusing on the areas where need and help are required and by inviting help and assistance as per the requirement. During the onslaught of the disaster it is the duty of the media to take care that the confidence of the people is not shaken. By giving factual information in a sober and calm manner media can prevent panic and also encourage relief measures. It is a pity that often panic, sometime wholly unfounded, resulted in painful disasters. The recent tragedy in Naina Devi Temple is a

glaring example of such disaster. Media can make a significant contribution in countering the damaging, exaggerated and negative rumors and propaganda.

The depiction of devastation and of human misery through the media may at times by itself act as an appeal to the people to some extent. But here the precautionary note is that media should be sensitive towards the privacy and the dignity of the affected.

Focus needs to be more on disaster prevention and reduction, instead of loss of life and damage to property. Both disaster mitigation agencies and the media should identify and communicate to the public specific measures that have either succeeded or failed to reduce the impact of natural hazards. Mostly, immediate disaster prevention response is local. It is important that the media should focus how at the local level the problems can be effectively addressed before expert help arrives.

Timely, accurate and sensitive communications in the face of natural hazards will lead to, cost-effective means of saving lives, reducing property damage, and increasing public understanding. Such communication can give advance warning and also inform and empower people to take all possible practicable steps to protect themselves from natural hazards.

Dr. Ferruccio Ferringni Elo, the then Director of programmes at the European University Centre for Cultural heritage stressed: “Societies are so overwhelmed by human emergencies, by human disasters, that we have halted in our tracks, as it were, on the road to progress and development, to stand helplessly by, paralyzed, watching so many human tragedies unravel before our eyes. We are not helped by how the priorities are perceived in the eyes of the media: human misery is far more news-worthy than a population that has been made safe and sound.”

In short, an earthquake or flood that does little or no damage does not deserve the concern and priority as in the cases of natural disasters having considerable impact on life and property.

Many times the links between important information and stories that appear “newsworthy” in the eyes of the media and the public are difficult to establish. A report at the World Conference from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), indicates “When images of tortured, starving faces and the bloated bellies of dying children lead the nightly news, the world rushes food and assistance to the hungry. As the food aid arrives, it feeds the news as well as the starving”.

The management agencies need to partner the media in bringing awareness, education and opinion building for increased recognition of the potentiality of disaster management to save human lives and protect property.

The two can work together to provide relevant training to reporters and field personnel to enhance both disaster preparedness and relief efforts. Media is not there just to report. It is a vital link between the scene of disaster and the rest of the world. Information is vital form of aid in itself.

The under-reporting and non-reporting can as well harm the situation. Media must evolve their own ethics, guidelines and strategies for covering disasters and balancing the public’s right to know with the right to privacy and human dignity The Press Council on its part has drawn up a summary of guidelines in such situation that I may quote here with advantage:

39. Reporting on Natural Calamities.

1. Facts and data relating to spread of epidemics or natural calamities shall be checked up thoroughly from authentic sources and then

published with due restraint in a manner bereft of sensationalism, exaggeration, surmises or unverified facts.

2. Natural or man made hazards become disasters through acts of commission and omission of the society, Therefore, the disastrous impact can be minimized by preventive actions taken by all the stakeholders including the media.
- 3 Media should give wide publicity on do's and don'ts and the potential benefits of disaster mitigation so that the society follows them before, during and after the occurrence of the disasters. People should be detailed on standard guidelines. The issues of children and women which are the most vulnerable groups during and after disaster should be handled carefully by the media.
- 4 It is necessary to have complete cooperation between the media and all governmental and non-governmental agencies. The extent of the coordination and cooperation between them determines the nature, the degree and the scale of the preparedness to prevent or meet the disaster.

It is pertinent to note that United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) convened the Global symposium on “Information for Humanitarian Action in Geneva from 22 to 26, Oct. 2007 when it noted: “Information has always been a key element in humanitarian action but recent emergencies and disasters have demonstrated how vital its role is in providing a basis for effective and informed advocacy, decision-making and resource allocation for affected population as well as humanitarian actors. Timely, accurate [and independent/objective/impartial] information is central to saving lives and strengthening recovery, the power

lies in its effective management, analysis and application.” Restrained and careful reporting of scientific prediction of an impending disaster would not only encourage timely preparedness but also rein in panic.

Undoubtedly, unwarranted interference of the mankind with nature has aggravated the situation. Sustainable development has been the keyword in today’s world. Therefore, it is imperative that media with its reach to the general public play a proactive role in minimizing the interference with nature through its awareness campaign and mitigate the difficulties of disaster management agencies by relaying correct and timely information from the public to the authorities and vice versa and sensitize the public and the civil society on preventive as well as follow up measures as an overall strategy to face disaster.

This workshop is providing a platform to media persons as well as policy makers to discuss various dimensions and facets of disaster, both natural and man made, and state of preparedness to cope with them. I hope the deliberations will fructify into concrete and meaningful suggestions that will be followed up and acted upon. I wish all success of this workshop.

Namaskar.
