

Address
By
Justice G.N Ray*

Most revered Rashtrapatiji Dr. Kalam, Respected Das Munshiji the Hon'ble Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Respected Sheilaji the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Delhi, Hon'ble Members of the Press Council of India, the distinguished delegates from India and various parts of the World, Ladies & Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to have all of you amongst us in this forum for addressing the issue on "Journalism, Ethics and Society", in the context of globalization. The revolution in communication technology, particularly internet connection has facilitated man to grasp the knowledge of entire world while sitting pretty in his study. In this context the journalism ethics has to be reviewed and reoriented in order to face the challenging situations.

The maxim "vox populi vox dei" form the crux of ethics for journalism. Ideally all print and electronic media in the present age act as the mouthpiece of democracy and cater information to the mass for creating public opinion on various issues.

In doing so, the media has to maintain the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability. When these principles, are applied in acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent reporting to the public, the media earn the credibility of general public.

In the age of globalization, there has been a total revolution in the communication technology and a wider world has been thrown open to the general public. Therefore, the principles of good journalism need to be directed towards highest quality of news reporting to the public and fulfilling the mission of timely distribution of information in service of public interest. In this connection it would be relevant to refer to the preamble to the Code of Ethics adopted by the Society of Professional Journalist, U.S.A. which states:

* **Chairman, Press Council of India on November 16, 2006 at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi**

“... public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialities strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalistic credibility.”

Evolution of the codes of journalism comprises aspects like objective reporting, accuracy and standard for factual reporting, self-regulation, impartiality, fairness, public accountability etc.

By objectivity, I mean that reporting of facts should be free from any distortion or exaggeration. Very often facts are distorted to suit a particular form of opinion or sometimes the facts are blown out of proportion. There should be distinct separation between news and views. The reporter must avoid conflicts of interest and the competing points of view should be balanced and fairly characterized. Reporting stories should be free from the reporter's personal, economic or political interests. A reporter has to pay attention to accurate attribution of statements made by individuals and other news media. Pictures, sound and quotations must not be presented in a misleading context and simulation, reenactments, alterations and artistic imaginings must be labelled as such and plagiarism must be strongly stigmatized.

Reporting the truth is not libel and in normal course of an assignment, a reporter is free to go about gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, video taping, recording of sound etc. He has to, however, keep in mind the principle of limitation of harm, which means that there is need for giving proper weight to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma.

In the urge for fair journalism, some news organizations have adopted the system of maintaining ombudsman to keep itself honest and accountable to the public. This type of self-regulation is a laudable effort as the internal ombudsman mediates conflicts stemming from internal and external pressures and maintain accountability to the public for news reported. In order to foster self criticism and to encourage adherence to both codified and uncodified ethics and standards, it would be only appropriate if a regulatory body like Press Council of India undertakes the monitoring and keeps effective watch

over the functioning of news media. Such a body when properly constituted will be quite capable of applying fairly consistent standards desired in media and of dealing with higher volume of complaints.

One of the most controversial issues in modern reporting in media is bias especially on political issues and on cultural and other issues too. Sensationalism is also a common complaint. Minor factual errors, if not corrected, sometimes may pose bigger problems as well. Besides, selective reporting or the brevity of the news reports reduces the fidelity of truth as the reports lack the needed context for public understanding. For maintaining reputation, a news organization has to adhere to professionalism, reliability and public accountability through consistent implementation of ethical standards.

Triviality of contents and extreme commercial pursuit by the news media by consciously making unethical compromise with the standard of journalism and well accepted norms to achieve more commercial gain at the cost of fair journalism, have been a global concern being discussed and debated by serious journalists, critical readers and social activists not only in India but in other countries also.

In a free press, the reporters enjoy fullest liberty and even may criticise the government openly. This is, however, restricted in various degrees where there is no free press. However, even in a free press mechanism, there is need for restraint. Extreme criticism, if goes out of proportion, may at times calls for prohibition or restriction through various forms of censorship if the government deems such reporting so sensitive as to destabilise social equilibrium. Laws regarding personal privacy, official secrets and media disclosure of names and facts from criminal cases and civil lawsuits differ widely and journalistic standards may vary accordingly.

In regard to taste, decency and acceptability in presentation of the news, the views of the audience count much. Different reactions may emerge in respect of depiction of violence, nudity, intemperate language etc particularly when such expressions are unacceptable or stigmatized by the local culture or laws such as consumption of alcohol, homosexuality, drug addiction scatological images etc. It is quite likely that individual reporters may have perception of different standards and practices but the overall efforts should be directed towards a balanced approach, which is constructive and beneficial and above all well accepted in the society. For this purpose various, methods of mitigating

negative reaction of the audience may be adopted such as advance warning of explicit or disturbing material, avoidance of offensive words, blurring of offensive images etc.

Investigative journalism, of late, has assumed importance in information gathering exercise, as sometimes it is quite impossible to elicit information by ordinary requests or searches. Such type of journalism is on the verge of risking the ethical standards as the work involves undercover journalism or use of whistleblowers or the covert methods of a typical private detective or even spying. Information gathered from anonymous sources often provides newsworthy information but it becomes impossible or difficult for the reporter to verify the source's statements.

Even though investigative journalism is a potent weapon for media but recourse to such journalism should be taken with extreme care and caution. Press Council of India has issued guide lines for investigative journalism.

Sometimes the reporters are incapable of proper reporting as they are not familiar with the scientific and technical terms or are not aware of the scientific and engineering developments. Such inaccurate reporting may also prove harmful. Fortunately, in various countries including India specialized courses in journalism and media reporting have been widely introduced so as to train the media persons with basic knowledge and niceties in special fields of media reporting.

The present scenario of the Press has led to emergence of social responsibility for the Press. The search for a suitable machinery to enforce the social responsibility has given rise to Press and Media Councils in various parts of the world. It is quite understandable that such councils have been formed to address the felt need of the concerned country in the context of social, economic and political set up of such country keeping in mind the basic tenets of journalistic ethics and morality and paramount interest of public welfare.

As a regulatory body of Print Media, Press Council of India serves dual constitutional purpose. Firstly, it protects the freedom of the press and independence of the newspapers and news agencies not only from the government authorities but also from the other external and internal forces. Secondly, the existence of such mechanism prevents legal restrictions being placed by the government on the Press. The Press Council of India also discharges its advisory jurisdiction in giving opinion sought for by

the government and other bodies concerning various questions relating to Media. In exercise of its adjudicatory jurisdiction it decides complaints made by and against media by individuals and public authorities.

There can be no two opinions that less is the intervention by governmental authority and the press is regulated and guided by its peers and responsible representatives of people as in the case of Press Council of India, the press will function more effectively, and with accountability to the nation and by enjoying the desired freedom of expression.

The Press Council of India has been a model of self-regulatory mechanism for the entire print media of India. It was conceived as an ideal arrangement as envisaged under a unique piece of legislation, the Press Council Act, 1978 enjoying the advantages of a voluntary body but functioning under a statutory mechanism quite freely without any intervention by the Government.

While the need for constant introspection of the functioning of media by journalists themselves can not be underestimated the importance of an independent regulatory mechanism of media is an accepted perception in all countries. How effectively the regulation of media can be achieved by maintaining freedom of expression deserves serious consideration. Such mechanism can not be a straight jacket formula but to be evolved judiciously in the context of socio economic and political set up and felt need of a country.

I am confident that the Seminar to be addressed by eminent personalities from India and abroad will help to formulate focused attention to the role of regulatory body and also of the media with orientation for “Bahujana Hitaya- Bahujana Sukhaya” (Good for many more and well being for many more). I conclude with a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi father of Indian Nation: -

“The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.”

Namaskar