



Journalism Professional Ethics

Prof. N. S. Ramaswamy*

Abstract:

Author compliments high standard of ethics which has been practiced by the Journalists and highlights the decline seen during the commercial era, focused on market economy where media has to go by commercial viability and profitability. This sometimes put pressure on the journalists to cover news and write what can excite the public. Often scandals, sensationalism, violence, vulgarity etc. get preference. Juicy stories, film stars and other celebrities, crime and communal violence occupy more space than the achievements of honest people. Sacrifices of brave shoulders, good police officials and law enforcement persons and justice focused judiciary, excellence in teaching, public service and the like are not highlighted adequately. The author warns that reporting of violent incidents, highlighting only violence trigger more violence and needs to be moderated. The need for young journalists is to identify role model journalists who fight pressures and report news in ethical way. He suggests the need for emphasizing ethics in academic courses in journalism and the need for upskilling and certification for the media managers and journalists to follow ethical reporting to avoid violence and encourage harmony.

Introduction

India has produced outstanding Journalists in English and Regional Languages, who are comparable to the best in the world. Apart from their competence in their field, many of them are men of excellent character, who observed independence and ethical standards. In fact, India's media - electronic, celluloid and print - have achieved world standards in quality of content and production standards. India's

journalists played a key role in developing our media as the fourth Estate of our democratic system. In fact, our standards are higher than most developing and advanced countries. Our journalists are recognized all over the world for their ability, courage and professional ethics.

Commercialization of Media

This is the commercial era of Kaliyuga, where most transactions and relationships

* Prof. N. S. Ramaswamy was Director of Indian Institute of Management. A Distinguished Management Guru And a Padmabhushan Awardee, he was also former Patron of the Society For 'Professional Ethics and Management'.

are commercial in nature, where ethical and moral values in all areas of human endeavor are gradually but surely declining. Naturally, the media cannot be an exception to this general trend. Popular media is established and sustained as a commercial enterprise. As is the policy of 'Market economy' news and views have to cater to the private interests of important segments of society and tastes of masses, ignoring societal considerations of the negative impact on planet and people. Professional journalists cannot easily adhere to well-known ethical norms, since the media has to go by commercial viability and profitability. But even here, there are many journalists, who have resisted pressures of vested interests and stood upright, fighting against commercial considerations, pressures and temptations, which invariably affect professionalism and ethical standards. For instance, TV serials and films have tremendous influence over people's way of thinking and behavior. In order to survive and prosper, they stoop down projecting sensationalism, scandals, violence, vulgarity, etc. At times, the press publishes rumors and speculations, exaggerate conflicts and misunderstandings, peep covertly into private lives, make heroes of rich and famous movie stars, ignore good work done by sincere and honest citizens, exploit tragedies for feeding curiosity of people etc. Also, they cannot adhere to societal priorities as such news are not interesting to readers and viewers, who relish gossip, scandals, perversions etc. They give undue emphasis to politicians and juicy stories which excite readers. Unfortunately, there is no effective regulatory mechanism to control the declining trends in values in all the three segments of the mass media. Journalist can be upright and bold and restrain and resist

this unfortunate tide, retain or restore ethical standards. It is in this context Seminars on Journalism and Professional Ethics are to be held which are rare.

Society and Media

The most important and powerful segment of a country to take it forward is the political system, parties and politicians. Unfortunately, India adopted a totally inappropriate Political Economy Model, which functions well only in advanced countries, because they are mono societies and where government does not participate directly in economic and social development. India is a highly plural society, hopelessly divided along religions, castes, languages and ethnicity. Further, Government is directly and actively participating in economic and social development as owner, businessman, entrepreneur, builder, banker, insurer, manager, controller etc.

The political system itself is fragile and unstable, with coalitions and regional parties creating conflicts and confronting the Center. Linguistic parochialism is cutting the roots of our unity. Our democracy is still functioning in spite of anarchy and chaos, which is a miracle. Journalists can help by fostering and strengthening good institutions and condemning those which destroy unity and stability. Next to politicians and the political systems, the most important and powerful segment of the country is the Media, called the Fourth Estate, particularly, the Print media and a part of TV dealing with news, public affairs, debates on political and economic policies etc. where journalists are the main functionaries. If Journalists can take a pro-active role, with courage and appropriate priorities, country

can be saved from fatal outcomes, such as fragmentation, destabilization, decline in values, crime, violence etc. Therefore, Journalists have to take a more effective, dynamic and ethical role in order to save our country from political collapse. Politicians are often compelled to be unethical in order to retain their vote bank, sectarian interests, loyalty to caste etc. They pamper their followers and provides money and “freebies” to buy votes. But Journalists need not stoop to such methods. They are safe and can be free. They can protect the people by using their tremendous power to expose fraud, encourage good people, foster unity and culture.

Media as a Catalyst

The meaning of Ethics is fairly well known. Some of meanings of the word 'Ethics' could be Dharma, culture, concern for others, virtuous conduct, truth, humanism, compassion towards animals, respect for nature, adherence to good values of the society, self-restraint, helpfulness and cheerfulness etc. From the point of Journalists, they could protect those who are oppressed and exploited by giving publicity and exposing fraud and corruption. Good citizens should be recognized and encouraged by giving them publicity, which they are not doing now effectively. A large number of dedicated citizens, serving the nation, do not get any recognition in the Press. Social celebrities, politicians, sports stars, cinema stars, scandals, scams etc get enormous publicity. Such lopsided presentation and space allocation affect morale of the people. Sensitive civic conscious citizens feel let down. The present policy “we report what will sell” is unethical. Deviant and violent incidents need not be given so much publicity.

Rape, murder and other criminal cases, sports and film world celebrities get front page and several more pages of newspaper space. However, thousands of selfless citizens, who contribute a great deal to society, do not get any coverage. So is the case with our heroic armed forces who sacrifice life and defend our country, honest and people friendly police men and women. Instead, non-consequential events are covered and given importance. This is unethical by any definition. In the name of art, one’s religious sentiments should not be hurt. There cannot be different yardsticks for different sections of the society.

It is considered that the Press & newspapers have to cater to what excites the public, as they need to increase readership and revenue. Private lives of film stars get greater importance and ample space. This is obviously unethical, since basic values are distorted. This is against the value system of any country. A recent report described the tremendous ill-effects of vulgarity in media in the behavior of children. Experts have pointed out the harmful ill effects of mass media on societal moral values.

Only during the last 20 years, Journalism has been included in the University education system. Even now, there is no serious research on its responsibilities and duties and its impact on society (beneficial or detrimental). In 1960, the US Federal Commission on Media reported that violence on New York streets used methods portrayed in the movies. Such is the permeation of media's, influence on public mind. During Christmas and Easter, 70% of sales take place, thus converting these holy celebrations into commercial events. Part of the Press gives a lopsided and

perverted presentation of people and events, thus lowering public taste, which is unethical. Negative impact on society through excessive exposure of sex, crime, violence etc is ignored. Increase in readership and viewership is the major criterion for allotting space.

Value Based Journalism

Many low standard newspapers have no ideology, philosophy or ideals. Just like education now, the media has also become pure business. Even in the University, Ethics are not taught. Journalism is considered a craft. I recall Ramnath Goenka saying "What we require is candidates with good language skill, and we shall take care of the rest". In recent times, power of media rests with the Department of Advertisement and Circulation. News editors have lost their age-old prestige and power. Some have become mere instruments to promote sales.

From being a mere career, as of now, it is possible for journalists to become professionals in order to serve society. While they may continue to cater to the needs of the media business and readers' interest and excitement, they should set apart some space for truth, noble values and justice. It should be their mission to maintain the unity and culture of the country.

Newspapers are expected to inform, interpret, expose fraud and scams, and entertain. They should also add education and protection of society and promotion of unity and culture as part of their responsibility. If that is done, Journalism can become a Profession with ethical values. At present,

anybody can be journalist, as in the case of politics. Giant business Corporations control major newspapers. Though owners did not interfere with Editors' freedom in earlier years, the owners' influence is increasing. Citizens are eagerly looking forward to Editors and Journalists to arrest this trend. In a 'market economy' based society, 'what will sell' would be the only criterion. In such a situation, the Journalist has to bend or succumb. What they can possibly do is protect 'human interest' in whatever way they can. Till that time, this unfortunate trend may continue.

Conclusions

- ❖ Market economy based media business has resulted in a decline of ethics in Journalism.
- ❖ Many Media Managements follow a policy of publishing 'what can sell' and increase circulation, and enhance business and profits.
- ❖ There are many journalists who have resisted pressures and stood upright fighting against commercial considerations and maintained ethical standards in reporting.
- ❖ In the name of freedom of expression, and particularly for press / medial, there is no regulatory mechanism to control the declining trends in ethical values and to support journalists to be upright.
- ❖ Seminars on Professional Ethics in Journalism, training and certification of Journalists and media managers to report truth in such a way to avoid violence, encourage harmony in society, appreciate and recognise service to society and Nation is the need of the time.

References:

1. “Prof. N.S.R. - His Thought, His Ideas”- published by Indian Heritage Academy. www.heritage.cartman.co.in
2. ‘Eradication of Corruption through Community Movement’ - Dr. R. Balasubramaniam - *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics & Management, Vol. 02, Issue No.4 (2011)*
3. ‘Ancient thoughts of Ethics on Environment’- B. G. Dwarakanath – *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics and Management, Vol. 05, Issue No.3 (2014)*
4. ‘Ethics in Advertising’ - T.N.K. Kurup – *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics and Management, Vol. 5, Issue No.2 (2013)*
5. ‘Towards Value Based Marketing’ - K. G. Nandakumar - *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics and Management, Vol. 1, Issue No.3 (2009)*
6. ‘Ethics in Politics’ - Prof N. S. Ramaswamy – *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics and Management, Vol. 1, Issue No.2 (2009)*
7. ‘Ethics – Present Status’ - Prof N. S. Ramaswamy – *Asian Journal of Professional Ethics and Management, Vol. 2, Issue No. 2 (2010)*



O Hidden Life, vibrant in every atom;
 O Hidden Light, shining in every creature;
 O Hidden Love, embracing all in Oneness;
 May each, who feels himself as one with
 Thee, know he is also one with every other

By Dr. Annie Besant

‘Often when we lose all hope & think this is the end,
 remember God and Pray, it’s just a bend, not the end’
 ‘Have faith and have a successful life’
 God gives, gives and forgives. Human gets, gets, gets
 and forgets.