

NEED FOR PROFESSIONALISM, TRAINING AND CODE OF ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

The media, institutionally and individually, exists on the citizen's right to access for information.

A code of ethics essentially covers rules of conduct of any profession. While the general law relating to a profession or to a professional organization is externally enforced under the watchful eye of another authority empowered to do so, code of ethics is intrinsically self-enforced and self-motivated. One fears the law more than one respects it, and one respects ethics more than one fears it. That substantially brings out the essence of a code of ethics both by implication and imposition.

Respect and fidelity to ethics and morals nursed by social and cultural norms of a people produce the quality of the professional to whichever profession he is attached. He commands the respect of those to whom the professional service is offered. Honour and dignity of a profession is elevated to the extent its practitioners adhere to the principles of ethics that govern and enlighten it. Therefore, respect and obedience to ethical principles is vital for the media if it is to enliven itself with the illuminating effect of morals that necessarily uphold the lofty ideals associated with the media.

Mores begin where the laws end. Thus the principles of ethics are much more revered than the principles of law, and stand above and beyond their functions and scope. Punishment in the event of disrespect for ethics is more self-inflicted. Unethical conduct of a single individual practising a particular profession injures and belittles the entire profession together with those who practise it. This is more so in media ethics the essence of which is embraced and followed more in its spirit than in words.

Self-discipline always ranks more exalted than discipline decreed; and, ethics is mainly about self-discipline with reverence for established norms and values.

Media ethics, for that matter ethics of any profession, cannot exist or persist independent of the moral content of the individual who practise it; and, he is expected to be bound by the ethical principles the core of which breathes life into the profession. Every media professional is considered to be of high moral standing with the media ethics interlacing only to strengthen them by streamlining their respect for ethical standards.

THE PRESENT POSITION :-

Issues of media ethics came into greater prominence in the eighties. Soon it was realised that the media can no longer enjoy public confidence without honest, accurate and balanced communication, whether in the print or the electronic media. However, equal respect for media values or ethical standards from all media organizations and personalities is a goal difficult to achieve .

On the other hand, to install media ethics in the profession is difficult because there are only a few imperatives that work in all situations. Some of the guidelines on the relevance of a code of ethics are so general that they are not always applicable to specific circumstances. This situation has now made to advocate a new system called situational ethics, that in short is to do the right thing at the right time. It has emerged in consequence to the unprecedented expansion in the communication field into such areas as advertising, public relations, opinion polling, market research, sports writing etc.

At present, except in nominal verbal existence, not only there is no code of media ethics in force in Sri Lanka, but also there is no media culture as such to boast of that commands respect of the readers, viewers and listeners.

The absence of a well laid code of ethics guiding and binding the media, morally more than legally, a profession which demands a high degree of moral aptitude has in general, glided itself to one which has respect and trust of the public diminished today. It's sad but true.

The present in this regard is appalling, and is somewhat a pathetic void needing immediate remedy as too long a time had been lost engaging everyone in discussions, seminars and forums most of which were limited only to words and reports. In the meantime, the electronic media as well as the print media, are expanding rapidly at a rate faster than the people could imagine of . What is reported, reviewed, related and reproduced for public consumption should command the respect and certitude without which communication will be reduced to mere conveyance of gossips, hearsay and rubbish.

UNETHICAL PRACTISES

Poor reporting, self- interest and failure to respect others, visible in many aspects of the media could be reasons for loss of regard for ethics or recourse to unethical practises. The importance of the code of ethics for the media springs to resolve the ethical part of the profession which certainly would improve the image of the self - designated "watch dogs" in the eyes of the public and the law. In a world of foul-play, deception and

corruption, media could be a beacon of light to focus on all venal practises and activities that had taken root in the society .

Unethical practises which sometimes render this honourable profession sour and ignominious with the public resenting and rejecting to believe them could arise due to intense competition among various media organizations with sights on commercial profits taking precedence over truth and honour.

Also, the public as well as the journalists as a whole believe that exposure of corruption, inefficiency and malpractises of the men enjoying state power is the duty and responsibility of the media. This right which they enjoy by virtue of being journalists when pushed to the extremes could provoke unethical means which themselves could unknowingly bring doom to the very honour of the profession.

In today's context of a high level of sub-standard professionalism that exists along with fierce competitiveness, the necessity to enhance the ethical perspective of the media is either ignored or neglected which is not a healthy feature in a free media culture. Journalistic ethics appear to have taken a back - seat, in the presence of journalistic individualism and commercialism.

EVOLUTION OF MEDIA ETHICS

Code of ethics for the media began to evolve in the early 20th century, and reached maturity later in the early seventies. During the latter part of the 20th century, unprecedented invasion on the freedoms and rights of the individual has further strengthened the need for a code of ethics primarily to safeguard the privacy and honour of both the individual citizen and the journalist himself. Freedom of expression cannot override the honour of the individual because it becomes contradictory to the very existence of an enlightened social environment. They should co- exist in mutual benefit in a move to encourage the social morals and to promote a well - informed public.

Wrong and unethical use of the media can lead in the long run, to lowering of human values as well as to moral and cultural degeneration of the society. Most of the charges or criticisms leveled against the media rarely suggested that transgressions were of illegal nature, but certainly of unethical character. Therefore, what should be reinforced is the code of ethics to escape criticism on irresponsible biased reporting. Ideal behaviour of a journalist or the institution he represents, is the ethical behaviour.

ADVANTAGES TO THE ORGANIZATION

Today the media is not a single unit organized within a single organization or under a single individual. There are different organizations with several stake holders in battle, sometimes with narrow political, cultural or racial motives competing for a larger viewer ship or readership by whatever means, with eyes on a bigger margin of profit for the institution.

The media today is essentially, like everything else, a business. Therefore, a code of ethics could possibly eliminate opportunities for cut-throatism, and development of unhealthy, mean methods which would finally affect the media, its quality and the consumer could be easily circumvented.

Whoever the journalist, whichever the institution, whatever the write-ups the media should give an honest view of the event or the issue involved. The organization is morally bound to respect a common code of ethics formulated in recognition and satisfaction of cultural and social well being of the people sustained by basic democratic principles. For instance, article 19 (1) (A) of the Indian Constitution guarantees the freedom of expression, but adequate safeguards are enshrined for protection of the interests of various linguistic, racial, social and religious groups in the country.

This is specially so in a pluralistic society with diverse ethical complexities as in Sri Lanka, India or Indonesia. While there is a contest among various media institutions there is also competition among various media organs (press, radio, television, internet etc); all that put together constitute the totality of what we call the media. That has made news no longer a media monopoly or someone's monopoly. One cannot be content with mere presentation of news unless it is something that is worthwhile for communication and in addition, carries a degree of charm, drama and sensation. Scandalous news has a greater consumer attraction than any other news. All these conflicts of interests aggravated by when one is called upon to write against one's own interests(e.g.: party, family, religion, race etc.) makes it imperative that it is exceedingly propitious to the media organizations as well, to have codified the standards of ethical principles.

Apart from the sensational lure, the public could develop a special liking to a particular media institution which could with the confidence of the consumer depending on how it selects and presents its views, reviews, features, news etc. However fierce the competition for a larger market, it should not result in a decline in ethical standards.

Media ethics developed over several decades in the 20th century were initiated by work norms

drafted by the media organizations. For violation of such rules, the media organizations were empowered to punish the offenders. Although punishment was not really to correct the wrongdoer, but mainly to restore the lost credibility and honour of the media and the media institutions.

In this regard, Ethical Journalism by Phillip Meyer urges a whole institution model for the media ethics wherein everyone would maintain the same high standard.

Since the media policy functions within a corporal structure, the proprietors, publishers and the journalists are however closely linked, they co-exist but, distinct from each other. To maintain this distinction and to preserve their identity as well, is ethically a noble principle. And, on the other hand, what the concern of the consumer is the accuracy in reporting and the authenticity of the opinion expressed. Yet transparency should be maintained to the extent that the public if necessary, should be able to ascertain the identity of the proprietors of a particular media organization.

The special relationship of the media organization and their consumers is determined by socio- economic factors, which put them on a plane different from other business ventures trading in commodities. The aim of the proprietors or the publishers is to boost readership or the viewer ship. However, it should not be achieved at the expense of the fundamental right of the citizen for information, and truthfulness when reporting. For ethical treatment of information, the target consumer is the individual and not the public in general.

THE CONSUMER

Mass media without doubt has transformed the life-style of the people today. There is not a single moment in one's day to day life without any one organ of the mass media coming into contact with them which makes one to adopt to new situations and products thrown up socially, politically, culturally and psychologically. Today the media is a massive organization with an immense influence over the life and conduct of the people, severally and individually.

Ethical principles promoting self - restraint and self-discipline in the dissemination of information, should lay down the guidelines for the benefit of the people who are awaiting with open minds to gather information.

The very existence of a code of ethics is for the advantage of the consumer because it is his rights which are meant for his edification and enlightenment, that the ethics are expected to protect . The target is the consumer and it is his interests, the right to know truthful information that is protected through respect for ethical principles by the media and the media institutions .

ADVERTISEMENTS

It is not only the news, features or reviews that need ethical cover but also the advertisements and commercials which share a great responsibility in shaping and influencing the life style of the people as well as the mode of their thinking on social and cultural issues which are closer to their hearts and minds, without any discrimination on age, race, sex or occupation.

What is obnoxious for the news reporter, may be usual business for an advertising agent or a sales promoter. However, the dividing line between the two to set up ethical standards, the test lies within the context of how the publicity material had been used; and whether they have been impinging on the ethical principles applicable in the relevant field of the media.

Since whatever is dished out from the media is consumed by the public without any distinction, the media should consider the standing of the unexposed consumer who should not be subjected to corrupt influence and inaccurate information distributed through unethical advertising.

What is communicated through advertising could be socially and culturally harmful to an innocent, ill - informed society in which consumerism is blatantly promoted and exploited at a cost to all norms of ethics. At a time when many readers, viewers and listeners tend to believe almost everything in black and white or in the visual, what is transmitted should not be misleading but true, authentic and accurate. The exaggerations should not go beyond a shade of poetic construction, and thereby should not suffer the ignominy of disbelief and inaccuracy whether in publicity programmes or in dissemination of news which are non-negotiable fundamental ethics to be observed by all media personalities at all levels at all times.

TELEVISION (TELEDRAMA)

Electronic media reaches a much larger segment of the population than the print media. For instance, in India the radio reaches 98% of the homes while the television viewer ship is about 60%, whereas the print media reaches only a mere 10% of the homes. The figures for Sri Lanka is almost the same with the electronic media claiming the biggest share of the consumers. It is the most powerful media because of its audio - visual impact and its widest reach.

In the television medium, teledrama is the principal attraction of almost every section of the viewing population. The whole family in a household embracing everyone young and old is enamoured by teledrama broadcast over any channel. A teledrama producer's freedom of expression and his creative freedom is generally not open to question except by critics of art, but

the broadcasting organizations have a moral obligation to its viewer ship on what they should telecast . What is permissible in X-rated feature films or in some U-certificated films, may be taboo in the small screen because it could threaten the very foundation of social and cultural values of the society with children being exposed to morally and spiritually unacceptable programmes .

Anything that is offensive to religious, racial or cultural sentiments of the people should not be the subject matter of a teledrama. Such pernicious material may exist outside one's home, but it should not be made to visit homes in disguise shrouded in episodes of a teledrama or a telefilm which may appear very innocent on the surface.

HARMFUL EFFECTS

Intoxicating drinks, which may appear in scenes within an episode, is socially a major problem in countries like Russia, Australia, Hungary, Italy and even in Britain. So visuals portraying consumption of liquor or smoking in domestic or public life, particularly when drinking or smoking is introduced as a means of redressing stress, sorrow or solitude is unethical and anti-social. There are several things one can use to show excitement than lighting a cigarette or gulping down a glass of alcohol. Messages, images and scenes glorifying and gratifying drinking or smoking either explicitly or implicitly, will undoubtedly send wrong signals to the media consumers down the line.

Other television programmes such as musicals, talk - shows, commercials, documentaries, current affairs etc. too, should be underpinned by ethical discipline fostered within accepted democratic ideals. Since television medium could appeal strongly to emotions creating a powerful impact, ethical principles should guide the actors and writers not to arouse base instincts of man which could certainly be both socially and individually harmful. Whatever flows down must be ethically filtered to elevate the taste and moral content of the viewers.

RELIGION

Man's susceptibility to religious perceptions, practises and beliefs, and his sensitivity to issues pertaining to one's freedom of worship, had always been enormous among the followers of any religion. No man does like to see, read or hear anything blasphemous or derogatory of his religion because it dents his spiritual awakening which incidentally makes his life easy to live and bear up problematic situations and calamitous confrontations.

So the media is undoubtedly morally bound to respect all religions and treat them all alike preserving their sanctity whatever one's own religious persuasion is. There is no greater force that could give one inner moral strength which is indispensable to man's existence than one's own religion, at least within the prevailing social and cultural environment.

TRAINING

Training is essential for any kind of profession. There is no profession that exists without a scientific training behind it, and the media is not different. Training in both theory and practise, before and after the commencement of the career, should continue in order to bring the best in the professional out, both ethically and intellectually in refined smooth blend. The principles of ethics that form the forte of any profession should be imbibed in the process of learning while they are in training so that the future media men in the making will equip themselves with ease having made the ethical principles to weave and blend with every fibre of the extensive texture of the profession.

Very recently we have been informed of instances of some medical students physically assaulting some student-nurses, and the law students fasting against a punishment legally meted out to some law students who were found guilty. Mind you, they are studying for two most respected professions in the country today. Where are we leading for, if such budding professionals even from during their learning and training resort to such mean unethical as well as unlawful means of protest, and show of dissent unworthy of their professional status?

In case of the media, need to heed the much adored ethical standards of the profession is much greater because on the one hand, the media touches almost every person in the country, and on the other, the unethical conduct of a media personality could corrupt and erupt a whole society making it socially and culturally vulnerable and gullible to anything they say. So infusion of ethical standards to the media should begin with the first day of training and hence, training is of utmost importance to the media profession in order to turn out the complete media man.

CONCLUSION

In the nineties of the last century, the discussions on media ethics had become a hot and popular topic among the lawyers, media men and the academics with each year new grounds being broken and fresh norms being advanced. Therefore, codification of media ethics should first concentrate on what should form the lasting and non-negotiable part of institutional and individual rules of ethics. Any system of accountability is now held to be impinging on the freedom of choice. However, according to John C. Merrill infringement is sometimes desirable.

In any case, enforcement of ethical standards being finally made the responsibility of the courts, is not the right spirit in which the media should operate for the benefit of the consumer. Self-discipline voluntarily imposed by committed respect for code of ethics, gives the media a true sense of professional honour and pride which nobody likes to taint or infringe upon. The idea of professionally qualified journalists being licensed and given them a code of ethics though, is a practical way of bringing them within an environment of ethical behaviour, it is preferably better observed through the inner discipline inspired by an overall good conduct of the individual. In other words, if the media men train themselves to be gentlemen in its core elements, adherence to media ethics will come naturally and effortlessly from within.

However, adoption of a code ethics at national level should be one prepared by the profession itself without government intervention . Ultimately, the journalist's final protectors are the people to whom they serve giving full force and effect to the rights they eventually enjoy as free citizens in a democratic society.