

“Media Ethics”

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“ Let noble thoughts come to us from every side” is the eternal message of the Rigveda given several millennia ago signifying the freedom of expression.

The modern democratic edifice has been constructed drawing on the above and the individual liberty of expression of thought as the supreme principle. 'Journalism', the concrete form of this expression has grown in power over a period of time. It has become a coveted profession amongst the present day career conscious youth and I am sure I find here today a most promising group many of whom will surely find place amongst the leading journalists in the years to come.

The fundamental objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views, comments and information on matters of public interest in a fair, accurate, unbiased: and decent manner and language.

In 1948 the United Nations made the Universal Declaration of Human Rights laying down certain freedoms for the mankind. Article 19 of the Declaration enunciates the most basic of these freedoms, thus: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression’, the right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

*‘Media Ethics’: Address by Chairman, Press Council of India on 18th January 2007 at IIMC, Dhenkanal, Orissa.

Article 19 (1)(a) of the Constitution of India guarantees to the citizen, the right to “Freedom of speech and expression”.

The press is an indispensable pillar of democracy. It purveys public opinion and shapes it. Parliamentary democracy can flourish only under the watchful eyes of the media. Media not only reports but acts as a bridge between the state and the public.

At a time when the globalization of Indian economy has brought about drastic change in the mediascape and the Indian press is also going global, the responsibility of the press to safeguard the interest of the people and the nation has increased manifold. With the advent of private TV channels, the media seems to have taken over the reigns of human life and society in every walk of life. The media today does not remain satisfied as the Fourth Estate, it has assumed the foremost importance in society and governance. While playing the role of informer, the media also takes the shape of a motivator and a leader.

Such is the influence of media that it can make or unmake any individual, institution or any thought. So all pervasive and all-powerful is today its impact on the society.

With so much power and strength, the media cannot lose sight of its privileges, duties and obligations. Journalism is a profession that serves. By virtue thereof it enjoys the privilege to 'question' others. This privilege includes the right to collect information from primary authentic sources, which are of use and importance to the society or the nation and then report the same in an unbiased and positive way with the aim to inform and not to create sensation and harm the public. Any direct or

indirect interference from state, the owner or other sector is encroachment on its freedom to discharge its duties towards the society.

However to enjoy these privileges, Media is mandated to follow certain ethics in collecting and disseminating the information viz., ensuring authenticity of the news, use of restrained and socially acceptable language for ensuring objectivity and fairness in reporting and keeping in mind its cascading effect on the society and on the individuals and institutions concerned. You will all appreciate that while freedom of expression is no doubt a fundamental right; it has to be broadly guided and bound by societal duties and ethics. This involved a sensitive balancing act to protect the rights of individuals while exercising the right of expression

As Albert Schweitzer, German Nobel Peace prize winning mission doctor and theologian had remarked “The first step in the evolution of ethic is a sense of solidarity with other human beings”.

Ethics is a code of values, which govern our lives, and are thus very essential for moral and healthy life. In the context of the press, “Ethics” may be described as a set of moral principles or values, which guide the conduct of journalism. The ethics are essentially the self-restraint to be practised by the journalists voluntarily, to preserve and promote the trust of the people and to maintain their own credibility and not betray the faith and confidence of the people.

The media all over the world has voluntarily accepted that code of ethics should cover at least the following areas of conduct.

- i. Honesty and fairness; duty to seek the views of the subject of any critical reportage in advance of publication; duty to correct

factual errors; duty not to falsify pictures or to use them in a misleading fashion;

- ii. duty to provide an opportunity to reply to critical opinions as well as to critical factual reportage;
- iii. appearance as well as reality of objectivity; some codes prohibit members of the press from receiving gifts'
- iv. respect for privacy;
- v. duty to distinguish between facts and opinion;
- vi. duty not to discriminate or to inflame hatred on such grounds as race, nationality, religion, or gender; some codes call on the press to refrain from mentioning the race, religion or nationality of the subject of news stories unless relevant to the story; some call for coverage which promotes tolerance;
- vii. duty not to use dishonest means to obtain information;
- viii. duty not to endanger people;
- ix. general standards of decency and taste;
- x. duty not to prejudge the guilt of an accused and to publish the dismissal of charges against or acquittal of anyone about whom

the paper previously had reported that charges had been filed or that a trial had commenced.

The freedom of the press has to be preserved and protected not only from outside interference but equally from those within: An internal mechanism for adherence to guidelines is sought to be ensured through mechanisms such as 'letters to the editor', internal Ombudsman, Media Council of peers and Media Watch Groups which focus the wrongs committed by the media persons, journalists or the management. These measures not only ensure the accountability of the media and act as a brake on the arbitrary and unbridled use of power but also help to enhance the credibility of the press. These ethics are not in the nature of control on the press but are necessary for fair and objective use of the press for maintaining freedom of speech and expression in true spirit.

The mandate of the Press Council of India, as well as similar bodies across the world is to specifically promote the standards of the media by building up for it a code of conduct. It is to be appreciated that our legislation very wisely did not entrust on the council the task of 'laying down' a code of conduct. For ethics cannot be mired down in a strait jacket.

From their very nature, these broad principles cannot be treated cast-iron, absolute rules of law, rigidly applicable in all situations, under all circumstances. These are flexible, general principles, the range, reach and terrain of which are wider than those of law. The sanction behind them is moral; the source of their motive-force is within the conscience of the media person concerned. The pronouncement and directions of the Council activate that conscience, and the principles articulated by it, act

as lights that lead and guide the journalist along the path of ethical rectitude. Compiled in a compendium titled "Norms of Journalistic Conduct", they act as a reference guide in varying circumstances for the journalists.

What more accurate and better way to conclude can be than the words of Mahatma Gandhi, an eminent journalist is his own right, "The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power; but just as 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".

My good wishes to all of you for success in your life and mission.
