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Freedom of Press and Journalistic Ethics

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Abstract

Along with freedom, comes the responsibility to be pursued. India is a country where along with modernization, resides traditional ideas and they are not that favorable for its development. It is the function of the media to fight the backward nations of casteism and communalism and aid people to fight poverty and other social ills. Freedom of press and the practice of journalistic ethics is one of the most important discussed matters in contemporary times. It is not only the press, but entire media that comes under this consideration. There needs to be a proper discussion on this contentious issue including the duties and responsibilities of the press as the media in present times, have become very eminent and dominant in the society. For a proper functioning of democracy, it is very important that citizens should be well informed about the various happenings within the society, so that people from logical statements. Hence, the presence of media in democracy is important in gathering news for the common masses. For this, reason, the press gains emphasis in all the democratic nations.

Introduction

In a democratic country like India, media have played a very important traditional part in offering information to the people about the social and economic evils. But media also has a great responsibility in maintaining the accuracy and fact of the news presented. It is its responsibility to attentively speculate the news represented. The press and the media, now-a-days have involved themselves in various ill practices like distortion of news that may consist of truth factors. This not a good aspect for a democratic country like India. Yellow journalism is another form that has gained emphasis along with sensationalism. Paid news is another aspect that has come into exercise in recent

times. The Indian major population is backward and ignorant, so media needs to play a very important role here irrespective of pressures coming its way.

The media has an enormous responsibility regarding this. In contemporary era, political leaders are voted to power because of their oratory and manipulative talents and not for their knowledge and desirable quality. We cannot expect better governance, if we continue to elect people with criminal track records and malaise intentions. The freedom of press is unnoticed if one just pays a surface attention to it, but when one observe the actual nature of it in broader sense, one gets to know about the ugly picture. Though press is independent but still not privileged like it should be in a democratic country.

Freedom of Press and Journalistic Ethics

Under its freedom, the press is all free and allowed to print and publish information without any limitations to criticize, circulate and to access to public information. According to a media professional, there has not been much restrictions exercised on the press since the emergency of 1984. The freedom of press needs checking and though there is a need for special recognition of press within the Indian Constitution. In order to keep a check on media organizations by reducing the growing number of channels, a check is necessary to curb sensationalism.

Some of the professional bodies related to the press have formulated voluntary code of conduct as part of their efforts at self regulation. The code of Ethics, formulated by the All India Newspaper Editors Conference, is applicable to its member.

The following codes of ethics have been recognized by **All India Newspaper Editors Conference (AINEC)**:

- As the press is primary instrument in the creation of public opinion, journalists should regard their calling as a trust and be eager to serve and guard their public interests.
- In the discharge of their duties, journalists should attach due value to fundamental, human and social rights and shall hold good faith and fair play in news reports and comments as essential professional obligations.
- Journalist should endeavor to insure that information disseminated is factually accurate. No fact shall be distorted or the essential facts deliberately omitted. No information known to be false shall be published.
- Responsibility shall be assumed for all information and comments published. If responsibility is disclaimed, this will be explicitly stated.
- Confidence shall always be respected. Professional secrecy must be preserved.

- Any report found to be inaccurate and any comment or inaccurate reports shall be voluntary rectified. It shall be obligatory to give fair publicity to a correlation of contradiction when a report published is shown to be false or inaccurate in material particulars.
- Journalists shall not exploit their status for non-journalistic purposes.
- Journalists shall not allow personal interest to influence professional conduct.
- There is nothing so unworthy as the acceptance or demand of a bribe or inducement for the exercise by a journalists of his power to give or deny publicity to news or comments.
- Freedom in the honest collection and publication of news and facts and the rights of their comments and criticism and principles which every journalist should always defend.
- Journalist shall be very conscious of their obligation to their fellows in the profession and shall not seek to deprive fellow journalists of their livelihood by unfair means.
- The carrying on of professional to give importance to controversies in the press, in which no public interest is involved shall be regarded as derogatory to the dignity of the profession.
- It is unprofessional to give importance to rumors or loose talk affecting the private life of individuals. Even verifiable news affecting the private life of individuals shall not be published unless the public interest as distinguished from public curiosity demands its publication.
- The press shall desist from publishing matters likely to encourage vice and crime.

Norms of Journalistic Conduct as Enshrined in the Rule Book of PCI

Accuracy and Fairness

- The Press shall eschew publication of inaccurate, baseless, graceless, misleading or distorted material. All sides of the core issue or subject should be reported. Unjustified rumors and surmises should not be set forth as facts.
- It is incumbent for newspapers to play a positive role in response to rumors affecting the credibility of financial institutions having public interface.
- While it is the duty of the press to expose the wrong doing that come to their notice, such reports need to be backed by irrefutable facts and evidence.

Pre-Publication Verification

- On receipt of a report or article of public interest and benefit containing imputations or comments against a citizen, the editor should check with due care and attention its factual accuracy apart from other authentic sources with the person or the organization concerned to elicit his/her or its version, comments or reaction and publish the same alongside with due correction in the report where necessary. In the event of lack or absence of response, a footnote to that effect may be appended to the report.

- Publication of news such as those pertaining to cancellation of examinations or withdrawal of candidates from election should be avoided without proper verification and cross checking.
- A document, which forms a basis of a news report, should be preserved at least for six months.

Caution against defamatory Writings

- Newspaper should not publish anything which is manifestly defamatory or libelous against any individual or organization unless after due care and verification, there is sufficient reason or evidence to believe that is true and its publication will be for public good.
- Truth is no defense for publishing derogatory, scurrilous and defamatory material against a private citizen where no public interest is involved.
- No personal remarks which may be considered or construed to be derogatory in nature against a dead person should be published except in rare case of public interest, as the dead person cannot possibly contradict or deny those remarks.
- The press has a duty, discretion and right to serve the public interest by drawing readers attention to citizens of doubtful antecedents and of questionable character, but as responsible journalist they should observe due restraint and caution in hazarding their own opinion or conclusion in branding these persons as ‘cheats’ or ‘killers’ etc. The cardinal principle being that the guilt of a person should be established by proof of facts alleged and not by proof of the bad character of the accused. In the zest to expose, the press should not exceed the limits of ethical caution and fair comment.
- Where the impugned publication is manifestly injurious to the reputation of the complainant, the onus shall be on the respondent to show that it was true or to establish that it constituted fair comment made in good faith and for public good.
- Newspaper cannot claim privilege or license to malign a person or body claiming special protection or immunity on the plea of having published item as a satire under special columns such as ‘gossip’ ‘parody’ etc.
- Insertion out of context, uncalled for and irrelevant statements likely to malign a person or an organization must be eschewed.
- It must be remembered by the press that the freedom of speech and expression enshrined in the democratic set up and enjoy by the fourth estate also casts on it a responsibility. The newspapers are not expected to use it as a tool by itself creating evidence and later using the evidence to make false propaganda in its own journal.
- The press deserves accolades for bringing to light the inducements offered to influence their reporting and such exposure will not amount to defamation.
- As a custodian of public interest, the press has a right to highlight cases of corruption and irregularities in public bodies, but such material should be based on irrefutable evidence and

published after due inquiries and verification from the concerned source and after obtaining the version of the person or authority being commented upon.

- The media and the authorities are two very important pillars of our democracy and for the government to function successfully in public interest a press as responsible as watchful is an essential pre-requisite.

Conclusion

Journalists, being the watchdog of a society, take the onus of several responsibilities. They not only inform, educate, entertain and elicit opinions in a society, but also be the quintessence of change. They also tend to preach the tents of morality and set a higher benchmark of growth. Journalists are also ethically responsible for sustaining harmony in a society. Because of the role assigned to the media, a journalist has a greater duty than others in the society. Press enjoys a particular privilege. It has constitutional guarantee for its liberties. For that reason people expect much from the print industry compared to electronic media. Let us remember that “There is still widespread among pressman a sense of vocation they feel a call somewhat as sailors feel the call of the sea. (First Royal Commission on Press).”

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