

Media ethics getting complex

Professional bodies can do a lot

by N. Bhaskara Rao

WONDERING whether there are any professional codes of conduct in journalism, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh raised at The Tribune's 125th anniversary function the issue of media ethics and responsibilities in a provocative way. In no civilised society is mass media without some societal compulsions and moral obligations nor, is it without any restraints and responsibilities as in the case of freedom. Ethical foundation is what gives it a stature and strength for a societal role, particularly where credibility is the principal criterion, as in the case of mass media. Ethical practice and norms distinguish rights from wrongs. In fact, an unfettered Press, without ethical concerns, can be a threat to a free society and to its very independence.

As ethical standards are constantly under question not just in India but also in the rest of the world, it is important for the profession that they are discussed and reiterated from time to time. That is how ethics in general and in the context of mass media in particular are constantly debated. With the emergence of the electronic media — television earlier and satellite broadcasting more recently — media ethics is being viewed in a newer context and has become more complex as opera-

expansion of mass media, it is being viewed as more powerful than ever before, but at the same time the level of public confidence in the media has been on the decline, even in the US. News media in particular is being accused of arrogance, insensitivity, bias, inaccuracies, sensationalism, stereotypes, trivialisation and the conflict of interests and the disappearing line between advertising and news on the one hand, and between news and views on the other. This in turn could be said to have led to a certain decline in the role and stature of journalists in new establishments and an increased role of corporates in setting media priorities.

One associated aspect in this context is the growing corporationalisation of the media, causing certain shifts in the paradigm of media operations. This in turn has increased societal concern for the declining ethical standards. In that context, it is better that the media constantly encourages the public to voice grievances against the contents in particular. Such a practice implies ethical concern.

There cannot be specific rules about ethics for any situation. Nevertheless, each opportunity should help make sound decisions and empower people in that process to set their own standards styles and priorities in such a way that it

and larger public and also has long-range implications for what appears in the media today. A second corrective is the separation of the advertising function (and interests) from that of the editorial. In this regard, the US television channels, although their model is not something that fits the Indian socio-economic scenario, have recently taken a good initiative. For, unlike in the earlier years, they distinguish a "paid programme" from the rest prominently and specify when an ad looks like news or a feature as a "paid ad" or a "leased access" content and, in fact, even simultaneously disclaim questionable contents.

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As the issue of media ethics is becoming increasingly complex, it should no longer be confined to editors or journalists. As the problem is one of a few spoiling it for the many, professional associations or bodies have a particular responsibility to minimise the scope for such a tendency. Initiatives and interventions are needed from three different levels. Apart from those from within the media, the civil society and the educational system should be concerned about media ethics and also do something about it. More specifically in India, we need more forums for discussion on the role and impact of media on society and in the competitive scenario. Media watch groups should operate with civil society representatives at the national and regional levels. The best bet for any issue to do with the media is active and more discriminating readers and viewers. This also amounts to breaking the "trap of ratings" that the media is often under these days. This trap of rating of contents makes the country believe the what interests the people to watch momentarily is also in their interest. This vicious circle requires an informed and engaged citizenry.

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As ethical standards are constantly under question not just in India but also in the rest of the world, it is important for the profession that they are discussed and reiterated from time to time. That is how ethics in general and in the context of mass media in particular are constantly debated. With the emergence of the electronic media — television earlier and satellite broadcasting more recently — media ethics is being viewed in a newer context and has become more complex as operational compulsions of the new media are different. That is why issues to do with media ethics require serious deliberation at various levels within and outside the profession. Even in a competitive scenario such values are derived either from market forces or from self-imposed standards and codes evolved over the years by the players themselves as in the case of the Press. Even a regulatory mechanism by the state does not reduce relevance of media ethics.

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expansion of mass media, it is being viewed as more powerful than ever before, but at the same time the level of public confidence in the media has been on the decline, even in the US. News media in particular is being accused of arrogance, insensitivity, bias, inaccuracies, sensationalism, stereotypes, trivialisation and the conflict of interests and the disappearing line between advertising and news on the one hand, and between news and views on the other. This in turn could be said to have led to a certain decline in the role and stature of journalists in new establishments and an increased role of corporates in setting media priorities.

One associated aspect in this context is the growing corporationalisation of the media, causing certain shifts in the paradigm of media operations. This in turn has increased societal concern for the declining ethical standards. In that context, it is better that the media constantly encourages the public to voice grievances against the contents in particular. Such a practice implies ethical concern.

There cannot be specific rules about ethics for any situation. Nevertheless, each opportunity should help make sound decisions and empower people in that process to set their own standards and priorities in such a way that it becomes a good precedent to help consolidate freedom with responsibility and further the very credibility of the media. Overall, the Indian media in today's global scenario may not be the best but certainly not a bad one as far as its concern for ethics is concerned.

Towards sustaining media ethics there could be certain broad principles. First and foremost concern that should become a bedrock for media ethics is the realisation that the media has effects on the concerned

and larger public and also has long-range implications for what appears in the media today. A second corrective is the separation of the advertising function (and interests) from that of the editorial. In this regard, the US television channels, although their model is not something that fits the Indian socio-economic scenario, have recently taken a good initiative. For, unlike in the earlier years, they distinguish a "paid programme" from the rest prominently and specify when an ad looks like news or a feature as a "paid ad" or a "leased access" content and, in fact, even simultaneously disclaim questionable contents.

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ing this dilemma, both in the case of news channels and newspapers. A third area which often prompts an ethical dilemma, and increasingly so, is the mix-up of interests of media corporates with those of the editorial. Taking responsibility for the contents, which includes owing lapses of any kind and correcting promptly is another ethical practice which helps set a good atmosphere for media credibility. There are very few examples one could recall of media acknowledging something adverse it was responsible for and which it could have avoided or corrected. This is despite that accountability to readers or viewers is something most media organisations accept in principle.

As the issue of media ethics is becoming increasingly complex, it should no longer be confined to editors or journalists. As the problem is one of a few spoiling it for the many, professional associations or bodies have a particular responsibility to minimise the scope for such a tendency. Initiatives and interventions are needed from three different levels. Apart from those from within the media, the civil society and the educational system should be concerned about media ethics and also do something about it. More specifically in India, we need more forums for discussion on the role and impact of media on society and in the competitive scenario. Media watch groups should operate with civil society representatives at the national and regional levels. The best bet for any issue to do with the media is active and more discriminating readers and viewers. This also amounts to breaking the "trap of ratings" that the media is often under these days. This trap of rating of contents makes the country believe the what interests the people to watch momentarily is also in their interest. This vicious circle requires an informed and engaged citizenry.

The journalism schools all over owe to the country to do something in this respect. They need to assess ethical practices and come up with posers on contentious issues based on research and experimentation. They need to have a more active linkage with practising professions than at present. Ethical practices are never a hindrance even in a competitive scenario as we have today. On the contrary, freedom gets enriched and becomes more responsible. The media sustains its credibility from being concerned about the ethical implications. ■

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