

Self-regulating media

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खालि शक्ति त्यसै हुन्न सत्यको नलिई भरा।

जति चौडा भयो सत्य उति टिक्छ पुगी परा।।

---महाकवि लक्ष्मीप्रसाद देवकोटा

What happens when you do not care to tighten your belt? Simple and obvious: you will lose your pants !

No sane person will ever think of creating such a scenario for himself. A journalist even is more unlikely to fall into this trap, primarily because his job requires scrutinizing erring members of the very society he belongs to. In other words, he would not do what people in other professions are also not supposed to do.

Journalists are universally expected to apply self-restraint, because their profession needs to avoid situations—as far as possible---requiring state authorities to come with legal measures and initiate actions. Hence, to keep authorities away from their workplace (i.e. news rooms) journalists have to be self-disciplined. But how do they do that? They develop a set of self-regulating rules and then give undertaking to abide by them. Simple. They do it internally inside a media institution, and follow the same practice within media industry. Newspapers, radio stations, television networks and online services all are required to be governed by self-regulatory mechanisms. Journalists working for news agencies, which are often considered “wholesalers of news”, tend to be more rigorous in observing the rules and guidelines devised (and periodically revised) by their elders in the profession.

Role of the watchdog, as often the media is collectively perceived in the society it serves, has to be innocuous. Unblemished. Each bit of information journalists pick up for spreading as news report has to be credible and reliable. Margaret Simons of Melbourne University (Australia) describes them as professional messengers expected to be “the rodents of public life, if you like.” That is why rumours or crude and unconfirmed reports do not find a place in the news for publication or broadcast. As contaminated water and polluted air adversely affect human body, news reports which are not properly facts-checked (or have been deliberately distorted) can harm human mind.

Responsibility of journalists is understandably enormous. Any misleading piece of information that passes as a news item (or ‘story’) is bound to produce devastating consequences. It can result into cases of suicides, communal clashes, strikes by transporters or civil disobedience, palpably disrupting public life. This requires people in news business need to be serious in their job, strictly following guidelines prescribed for the profession.

Self-regulation mechanism entails introspection first at institution-level and then through bodies or agencies created to monitor media outlets such as press councils.

Each media organization offers a unique working atmosphere to journalists, simultaneously seeing to it that the set of rules approved for in-house observance are in line with the guidelines accepted and applied in the media industry. These internal guidelines are usually offered through in-house trainings and also in the form of the stylebook, copies of which are made available to journalists handling stories--in the fields where raw materials for stories are collected and at the desk where these are edited before being disseminated for public consumption. Routine review of news stories made public are done at regular editorial meetings enabling journalists to detect lapses and mistakes. And if need be, they can decide to issue corrections and clarifications. There are moments when editors have to print or air apologies, directing them simultaneously to the aggrieved persons/parties and also to the larger audiences. Some of the media houses appoint ombudsman with powers to examine contents and complaints and thereby offer independent professional comments---publicly.

At institutional level:

Training opportunities---to update on media trends, tastes of audience and technological advancements.

Stylebook---is useful for maintaining uniformity in spelling, following rules of grammar, checking facts and contexts, and above all choosing the right words for stories.

Ombudsman---examines contents and complaints against products/services, and offers suggestions to raise the credibility of newspaper /news channel.

At industry level:

Codes of Ethics---are meant to help journalists to be honest, impartial and balanced. Cooperation from owners of media institutions is crucial.

Press councils---are assigned to constantly monitor whether the required standards are being maintained by the players in the media field. By responding to complaints they reduce lengthy and expensive litigations.

Constitution and laws---contain provisions primarily to protect freedom of expression because journalists are expected to work in public interest. Legal measures are often invoked to restrain/penalize erring media institutions and journalists.

Self-regulation is a bulwark against potential interference and interventions

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P.S.

[Interpretation of Statutes Act, 2010 (1953) says a reference to male inevitably includes female.]