

# THE ROLE AND CONDUCT OF MEDIA IN ACCOUNTABILITY

**International Anti-corruption Day; December 8, 2007**

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As the fourth pillar in support of the essential tripod of government; the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary, the media is sometimes called “the Fourth Estate”. Essential to the health of democracy is access to information that viz (1) ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation and (2) serves a “checking function” by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them. An antagonistic relationship between media and government represents a vital and healthy element of fully functioning democracies. This may not be appropriate in post-conflict or ethnically homogenous societies, but the role of the press in disseminating information remains critical to mediating between the State and all facets of civil society.

America's successful revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century decided that government, if there should be government, should be accountable to the people. The people, in turn, could only hold the government accountable if they knew what it was doing and could intercede as necessary, using their ballot, for example. This role of public "watchdog" was thus assumed by a citizen press, and as a consequence, the government in the United States has been kept out of the news business. The only government-owned or government-controlled media in the United States are those that broadcast overseas, such as the Voice of America. By law, this service is not allowed to broadcast within the country. The media plays a role of political accountability and checks-and-balances, keeping an eye on public officials and institutions and constantly challenging them via reports, interviews, debates, etc. It can sometimes play the role of a direct political actor, when revelations by the press spark political crises and legal actions, when the press reveals political actions or plans that impact on the political scene. The mass media also plays an accountability role *vis-à-vis* the private sector and NGOs, reporting on their activities and making sure that they do not harm the public wellbeing. The media is a reflection of society. Very rarely can the mass media actually make people change their minds or their views instantly.

The Preamble to Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists says that, “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility”, unquote.

According to the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, investigative journalism is an information-gathering exercise, that looks for facts not easy to obtain by simple requests and searches, or are actively being concealed, suppressed or distorted. Where investigative work involves undercover journalism or use of whistleblowers, when it resorts to covert methods more typical of private detectives or even spying, it brings a large extra burden on ethical standards. Anonymous sources are always double-edged - they often provide especially newsworthy information, such as classified or confidential information about current events, information about a previously unreported scandal, or the perspective of a particular group that may fear retribution for expressing certain opinions in the press. The downside is that the condition of anonymity may make it difficult or impossible for the reporter to verify the source's statements. Sometimes sources hide their identities from the public because their statements would otherwise quickly be discredited. Thus, statements attributed to anonymous sources may carry more weight with the public than they might if they were attributed.

Objectivity involves unequivocal separation between news and opinion. Reporter must avoid conflicts of interest — incentives to report a story with a given slant. This includes not taking bribes and not reporting on stories that affect the reporter's personal, economic or political interests. Competing points of view are balanced and fairly characterized. Persons who are the subject of adverse news stories are allowed a reasonable opportunity to respond to the adverse information before the story is published or broadcast. Interference with reporting by any entity, including censorship, must be disclosed. One must maintain the confidentiality of anonymous sources, avoiding it if possible. Accurate attribution of statements must be made by individuals or other news media. Pictures, sound, and quotations must not be presented in a misleading context (or lack thereof). Simulations, reenactments, alterations, and artistic imaginings must be clearly labelled as such, if not avoided entirely.

Without mass media, openness and accountability are impossible in contemporary democracies. Nevertheless, mass media can hinder political transparency as well as help it. Politicians and political operatives can simulate the political virtues of transparency through rhetorical and media manipulation. Television tends to convert coverage of law and politics into forms of entertainment for mass consumption, and television serves as fertile ground for a self-proliferating culture of scandal. Given the limited time available for broadcast and the limited attention of audiences,

stories about political strategy, political infighting, political scandal and the private lives of politicians tend to crowd out less entertaining stories about substantive policy questions. Media events, scandals, and other forms of politics-as-entertainment eventually dominate and weed out other forms of political information and public discussion, transforming the very meaning of public discourse.

The “honest broker” role of the media is one of its most important functions. The people need the media to provide them with a fair and accurate report of events and policies. Even in times of great trials and upheaval, like the situation obtaining in Pakistan today, the people must be involved in important decisions and can only be so if they are part of the process. The media helps get them involved. Without a free and independent media, citizens cannot know that their voices will be heard. The government needs the media to get its message out so that the people can assess government programs and policies fairly, enabling them to better input in the decision-making process, suggest revisions, and, when necessary, hold their elected government representative accountable.

When freedom of the press is chained it allows one faction to exercise complete control over our ability to express our points of view. The media in Pakistan has been increasingly subjected to different types of intimidation to silence the voice of dissent and truth. The same regime that allowed “a hundred flowers to bloom” has engaged in acts of vandalising, threatening telephone calls, illegal detentions, harassment and use of various State bodies against journalists, writers, media owners and other members of the media. These tactics are systematic pattern of harassment and victimization used against those who cannot otherwise be tamed or bribed. Governments should realize that being in power they need to be held accountable. Visiting the US recently I was amazed at the agitation among Pakistanis settled there about the lack of information from Pakistan because of the closure of this well known and popular TV station.

Nearly 60 percent of the world's nations today are declared democracies, nevertheless most of them have instituted laws prohibiting reporting on a whole array of subjects ranging from internal activity and operations of government to the private lives of leaders. Some of these are well-intentioned efforts to "preserve public stability." But all of them, undermine not only self-governance but also good governance.

According to Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, “Media Responsibility” is a term for the belief that mass media have a basic responsibility to help strengthen and support democratic processes. Fairness, honesty and ethical behavior and open, probing minds must be nurtured. Journalists have to be committed to the excellence of their profession to its high standards, and to its defence. Journalists must also take upon themselves an important duty – to act as the people’s agents in seeking the truth and uncovering falsehood. They must adhere to the highest moral and ethical

standards. Editorializing belongs on the editorial or opinion page, which is clearly marked and not mixed with factual news reporting or objective analysis. It is important that journalists and editors report the news without injecting into it their own points of view. Sometimes we have transgressed this aspect of self-governance. There is perennial concern that the standards of journalism are being ignored. One of the most controversial issues in modern reporting is media bias, especially on political issues, but also with regard to cultural and other issues. Sensationalism is also a common complaint. As the media continue to change there are also some wider concerns, for example that the brevity of news reports and use of soundbites has reduced fidelity to the truth, and may contribute to a lack of needed context for public understanding. From outside the profession, the rise of news management contributes to the real possibility that news media may be deliberately manipulated. Selective reporting (spiking, double standards) are very commonly alleged, and by their nature are forms of bias not easy to establish, or guard against.

According to Wikipedia, "Media Accountability" is a phrase that refers to the general (especially western) belief that mass media has to be accountable in the public's interest - that is, they are expected to behave in certain ways that contribute to the public good. The concept is often collides with viz (1) commercial interests of media owners; (2) legal issues, such as the constitutional right to the freedom of the press and (3) governmental concerns about public security and order.

The aims of the **Center for Media and Democracy** (CMD) best expresses how journalists, researchers, policymakers and citizens at large can help the process of maintaining freedom, by viz (1) Countering propaganda by investigating and reporting on behind-the-scenes public relations campaigns by corporations, industries, governments and other powerful institutions. (2) Informing and assisting grassroots citizen activism that promotes public health, economic justice, ecological sustainability and human rights. (3) Promoting media literacy to help the public recognize the forces shaping the information they receive about issues that affect their lives. (4) Sponsoring "open content" media that enable citizens from all walks of life to "be the media" and to participate in creating media content.

Reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted to story preparation and the space available, and to seek reliable sources. Events with a single eyewitness are reported with attribution. Events with two or more independent eyewitnesses may be reported as fact. Controversial facts are reported with attribution. Independent fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable. Corrections are published when errors are discovered. Defendants at trial are treated only as having "allegedly" committed crimes, until conviction, when their crimes are generally reported as fact (unless, that is, there is serious controversy about wrongful conviction). Opinion surveys and statistical information deserve special treatment to communicate in precise terms any conclusions, to contextualize the results, and to specify accuracy, including estimated error and methodological criticism or flaws.

Journalism ethics includes the principle of "limitation of harm" ie withholding of certain details from reports such as the names of minor children, crime victims' names or information not materially related to particular news reports release of which might, for example, harm someone's reputation. The ethics and standards comprise principles of ethics and of good practice as applicable to the specific challenges faced by professional journalists. Media ethics is widely known to journalists as their professional "code of ethics" or the "canons of journalism." Existing codes share common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability which apply to the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent reportage to the public.

The principle of "limitation of harm" means that some weight needs to be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma. Quoting Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics directly viz (1) Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage (2) Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects (3) Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief (4) Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort (5) Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance (6) Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention (7) Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy (8) Show good taste (9) Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity (10) Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes (11) Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges and lastly, (12) Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

Reporting the truth is never libel, which makes accuracy and attribution very important. Private persons have privacy rights that must be balanced against the public interest in reporting information about them. Public figures have fewer privacy rights. Publishers vigorously defend libel lawsuits filed against their reporters

While the right to disagree is a fundamental prerogative and one has to respect that right, there must be logic and force of arguments, media must simply not become a vehicle to confuse issues by the coalescing of emotions. Our media must also be mature in making objective analysis and presentation on issues of consequence. Criticism must be done in good faith, at seeking improvements in the prevailing situation, rather than for denigrating something or maligning somebody. In the ultimate analysis both are on the same side, the side of the people, in their search for social and economic emancipation. The government must willingly accept the role of the media in accountability.