

Portrait of a reporter as a middleman

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By Sidharth Mishra



It seldom happens that one gets a chance to write a sequel to the Notebook. The reports last week about mediapersons seeking benefits from corporate houses led to the resignation of two senior journalists named in the purported Public Interest Litigation and nothing more. Before I come around to discuss why I am so dismissive of the issue, let me share with you some anecdotes as I did last week. About a decade, or may be a few years more, ago we had run a copy on the pending bankruptcy case in a foreign land of an upcoming business house in the education sector. This had brought instant recognition of the paper by the corporate house, which was also a big advertiser. I was invited by the chairperson to his swanky office for an interaction, wherein he “showcased” his nationalistic and patriotic credentials and explained how he was framed in the foreign land. As a parting gift, I was presented a copy of the book *Soul and Structure of Governance in India* authored by venerable Jagmohan, the upright bureaucrat and later Union Minister.

A few years later I entered into a contract with the same publishing house, which had published Jagmohan’s book. In the course of negotiations I was suggested that I could organise a bulk purchase of my forthcoming book through a corporate house to meet the production cost, “as was done in case of this book,” said the publisher pointing to Jagmohan’s title kept on the racks in my study.

After the publisher left, I reached out to the racks and realise there were two other titles neatly stacked alongside. One was by former President APJ Abdul Kalam and the other by former Finance Secretary and respected economist Bimal Jalan. These volumes had been gifted by the nation’s one of the oldest and largest NGO, which is currently seeing revival of its fortunes under the Swachch Bharat Abhiyan. In fact the NGO had flagged the pages where its and its founder’s names made appearance.

One of the charges levelled against one of the editors in the recent controversy is that he sought similar kind of bulk purchase for his book, the idea of which, by his own admission, was given up when his boss told him that it could amount to conflict of interest. This has been quoted in a section of media as “reinforcing the notion that journalists at the highest levels are ignorant of basic ethical premises of professional journalism.”

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This raises a larger question – are there any codified media ethics the violation of which should invite repudiation. While in one case using a cab led to termination of job, in another during the Niira Radia tape controversy, use of position to bargain for a ministerial position for a friend was got “examined” by a self-appointed court of inquiry whose members fell over each other to sign on the exoneration note.

Unfortunately media is one industry which examines with magnifying glasses the violation of codes by those in other professions but has functioned all these years without having one for itself. Secondly, media is one industry where there is no eligibility criterion at the entry point, nor any advertisement ever put out asking applications for job. While media has no qualms in repeatedly exposing recruitment scams, the recruitments in most of the media houses in itself are huge scams, most of the time amounting to professional incest.

Even the journalism diploma courses, including the one run by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, do have any accreditation from any professional body as in the case of Management or any other professional diplomas. The degree and Master’s courses run by most of the universities are a shame with those drawing the curriculum having no idea whatsoever about the industry requirements.

Thus in media industry we have people with varied academic credentials, professional skills and social network, in ascending order, which decides on the course their respective careers take.

Similarly despite the farce of wage boards like the ones under justices Manisena and Majithia being set-up, there is no parity in wages or work condition. The personnel atmosphere of media industry can only find a similarity probably in the film industry.

No wonder there are no codified media ethics. There will not be one as several editors today have business interests including those who pontificate much on transparency and objectivity. What stopped CNN-IBN under the stewardship of a very objective and autonomous editor to air the note-for-vote tapes? He later went onto to head the editor’s guild where he “vociferously” pursued the matter of paid news. If being paid to publish or broadcast a news is unethical, its more dishonourable to suppress an information for a consideration other than purely editorial.

A question would be also raised, who adjudicates whether a decision was editorially correct and principled. An editor’s word for it cannot anymore be taken on the face value. A trial by media in these matters certainly cannot be acceptable as in most of the cases it would be manipulated and biased, driven by professional rivalry. This brings us to the situation where the need for a regulator is strongly felt.

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My colleagues and friends in the profession may put me on the racks for endorsing the government view that there needed to be some kind of a regulation in the media industry. In my opinion, the regulator should not just monitor news but bring some semblance of respect for merit in the recruitment policies too. We can shrug off the image of middlemen only if we allow space to outside regulation.

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