

Media Practices: Human Rights Reporting – A Burning Challenge

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Abstract: Human Rights reporting is one of the most debated topics not only in India but all across the globe. The fact is that both – human rights and media happen to be among the most talked-about spheres of the modern era. Furthermore, these two facets evolve and redefine the contemporary age in multiple ways. The role of media in safeguarding human rights is quite properly laid and well defined. However, with growing competition after landmark changes like privatization and the advent of internet; there have been a lot of debates on ethical reporting of human rights issues. How much weightage should these issues be given? What is the “right way” of reporting such stories? To what extent is sensationalizing stories to survive in the market correct? Is it right to place Human Rights stories above the primary role of the fourth estate, which is to inform? The objective of this study is to understand current media practices and their effectiveness in upholding human rights. In addition, the study also aims at critically analyzing the ongoing standard of gate keeping and reporting in context of human rights. Through content analysis, primary and secondary research as well as surveys; this study attempts to understand the right balance between ethical reporting and ‘over highlighting’/sensationalizing.

Keywords: Human Rights, Media, Role of Media, Democracy, Functions of Media

Introduction

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”

(-Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948)

The very idea of Human Rights arises from the belief that every individual, by the virtue of his/her humanity, is entitled to several natural rights. This concept is a recurring ideology throughout the entire history of humankind. It dates back to centuries, from the Hammubarai Code to the Vedas and from the Magna Carta to the French Declaration of Human Rights and even the American Bill of Rights. History reveals that the significance of human rights has been recognized time and again. It has been widely accepted that human rights is a necessary component for the overall well being of civilizations across the globe.

The first ever legal codex for Human Rights was created by the King of the Sumerian city of Ur – Ur Nammu – in 2050 BC. This codex was followed by several other sets of such laws in Mesopotamia, including the best preserved example – Code of Hammurabai of the year 1780 BC. A host of rules, regulations and punishments on various matters, such as slave rights, women rights and children rights were mentioned in the code. During the 6th century BC, the Persian Empire in Iran established unprecedented human rights principles, under the rule of Cyrus.

After around three hundred years, the Mauryan Empire established the concept of civil rights. Sacred documents including the Analects of Confucius, the Vedas, the Quran and the Bible also refer to the responsibilities and

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rights of citizens towards humanity.

Brought to effect in the year 1222, the Manden Charter of Mali was a firm declaration of key human rights. It also condemned the evil practice of slavery. During the 17th as well as the 18th century, several European philosophers developed and propagated the idea that people are entitled to certain set of rights by the virtue of being born as humans.

The United States Declaration of Independence also encompasses the principle of natural rights and states the following:

“That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”

The charter of the United Nations came into force in the month of October in the year 1945. The charter opens with the oath for all member countries to save at least three succeeding generations from war and to re-establish their faith in basic fundamental human rights. It also states that all member nations reaffirm the faith of their citizens in the dignity of human being.

Furthermore, the World Conference of Human Rights of 1993 was a landmark event in the evolutionary history of human rights. This was the year when the Vienna Declaration came into effect. It encouraged the UN to strengthen and pursue activities that prioritize human rights on an equal level as democracy and development.

Interestingly, the UN Commission on Human Rights, created in the year 1947, also documented another commission on the issue of Freedom of Information and that of the Press. This sub-commission was supposed to report to the Human Rights Commission. **This clearly establishes the juxtaposition of the Press with human rights.**

Media or the Fourth Estate plays a significant role in forming a nation’s philosophy. It lays down the very foundation of the information pool and hence the thought process of any community or country. Hence, it becomes an obvious fact that the media plays quite a significant role in safeguarding and preserving human rights. The role of media in safeguarding human rights is quite properly laid and well defined. However, after certain landmark events, such as privatization of media and advent of the internet, media has been under a lot of critical scrutiny for human rights reporting. Gate keeping standards, over sensationalizing, over prioritization of human rights issues, negligence of human rights cases and the *right ways* of human rights reporting are some of the most significant debates today. Through this paper, we aim to analyze contemporary media practices and their impact on human rights preservation.

Case studies, in-depth research, case studies and several surveys revealed that the media tends to highlight certain stories, which gain popularity. A similar story of similar line (Human Rights) might not be taken up by media houses if it does not go viral. Thus, the study argues that it is the professional obligation of the media to report such issues as precisely as they do for other domains – state facts, provide context and avoid bias.

Literature Review

Human Rights Reporting is quite a challenge for the industry. On one hand, the media has to maintain its objectivity, which means it has to report news ethically. On the other hand, the media has to exercise fairness by giving voice for every segment of the society. “The Role of Media in Protection of Human Rights” by G.N Ray (2014) examines how the media has been instrumental in shaping the opinions of the society even in the most difficult times and in context of the most controversial scenario. The paper discusses how in Punjab crude censorship was imposed on the press by militants threatening its freedom and objectivity. Warnings from the

government against ‘objectionable or subversive content’ added to the precariousness of the press. In its report of 1991, the Press Council had declared that it would not be right to veil the point of view of militants from the society. The report argued that the very basis of democracy states that every citizen has a right to know the perspective of militants and what they stand for. However, the report did counsel the media to exercise due caution and practice vigilance in this regard. Similarly, in Kashmir, the role and plight of the media have come under the scanner time and again. Mr. Ray clarifies in this paper that the psychological warfare played by terrorists needs unbiased and careful investigation.

However, the fact that media is often criticized for mishandling sensitive stories of human interest, cannot be denied. Enaxi Saikia Barua in the paper “Role of Media in Upholding Human Right” (2015) says that media’s insensitive approach towards human dignity is noticed sometimes. Barua argues that TV channels do this in their urgency to be the first to report in case of bomb blasts, plane crash or worse – communal violence. Furthermore, insensitive visuals of victims of explosions, plane crash, riots or any accident are shown repeatedly to monger higher TRPs. The paper states and I agree that sensationalizing death and fatal events to attract higher viewership/readership cannot be justified. This is sheer violation of the human rights and the Constitution of India, which gives its citizen a Right to dignified life and death.

It can be argued that these images are shown with the intentions of creating waves of revulsion and protest among public against riots etc. However, when such images are shown on TV without prior warning, viewers get shocked as well as offended, mostly effecting children. Moreover, depiction of these stories in the media has yet another dangerous consequence. It gives the perpetrators a sense of accomplishment and bravado, hence encouraging violence.

Now, the paper titled “Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting” (ISBN 2-940259-23-2, 40 Swiss Francs plus postage) (2015) very clearly talks about the impediments related to human rights reporting. The writer bullets a list of factors, which act as obstacles for the media when it comes down to issues/stories related to human rights. One of these aspects discussed in the paper, is the problem of bias. It is true that the issue of bias is not only unending but also a complicated one. Governments and political parties abuse human rights to conceal/manipulate facts while sometimes it is integrated with foreign policies. This makes it difficult to segregate national interest and principle. Furthermore, human rights are not only an international law but also a discourse of major emotional appeal. This complicates reporting making it difficult to ascertain the bias and unbiased.

Another impediment in this regard is the use of a certain jargon. The media needs to be extremely precise when it comes to terminology. The media needs to understand that the use of a set of ‘human rights terminology’ like genocide, war crime etc should be avoided. Other obstacles include selectivity due to limited space to publish or broadcast and pollution. Now, what is pollution? According to the paper titled “Journalism, Media and the Challenge of Human Rights Reporting”, pollution is basically the distortion that occurs in a raw story after it is processed for publication/broadcast on the basis of several factors. It becomes particularly more damaging when stories related to human rights are ambiguous or lead to inappropriate or false assumptions.

Other obstacles in human rights reporting as discussed in this paper include reductionism, sensationalism, negativity and absence of context.

- Reductionism – It is the practice of analysing a complex phenomenon with regard to its fundamental or basic constituents.
- Sensationalism – It is the presentation of stories in a way intended to provoke public interest or excitement, at the expense of factual correctness and accuracy.

- Negativity and Absence of Context lead to misguidance of masses and miscarriage of information.

The Positive Side of Human Rights Reporting – Some Instances

❖ The Prince Fell into Bore well Case of Haryana, India

When a 5-year old boy fell into an unattended bore well in Haryana, India, no one thought that it would become a matter of national news. But, yes. It did. A boy falling into a bore well is an everyday event in a country like India, with the world's second largest population living mostly in sub-urban/rural parts. However, Prince's case became a special one due to aggressive media coverage and rigorous Live reporting on all channels. The authorities, even the army, got involved and the kid was rescued after around 48 hours of tussle. In this case, media fulfilled its role of significant reporting to save a young boy's life. The links below show the entire story:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL5kUmoUz8o>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhHyDnimZJ8>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRo9oWnSD8>

This story led to a strange yet significant uprising where such stories started getting media's attention, forcing authorities to work accordingly. Links below refer to similar stories in the media:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alDtJD8damE>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QE-91UmLlgw>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zm3IyBSYMA>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XaStZeJz0g>

❖ 2008 Mumbai Attacks

Not only India but the entire world was shaken with the November 2008 Mumbai Attacks when some 10 militants carried out a series of bombings and shooting across four days in Mumbai. More than 165 people were killed and over 300 were badly injured.

The media's conduct during the The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel siege was not only insensitive but it was actually senseless. Some of the leading broadcast channels were continuously streaming the activities going on at the location, which gave the militants an upper hand. They were able to monitor the activities of Indian forces and plan defense/attack. This was highly condemned by the government and masses.

- <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/live-tv-coverage-put-national-security-in-jeopardy-says-bench/article3836676.ece>

Also, a lot of erroneous reporting was done by the international media leading to various repercussions.

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erroneous_reporting_on_the_2008_Mumbai_attacks#E-mail_to_Indian_media_claiming_responsibility

The media needs to prioritize its objectives. The fourth estate is supposed to ensure national security and integrity. They cannot afford to risk the national security in the name of dissemination of information. What to show, how much to broadcast and how to maintain confidentiality in the interest of the nation are also major job roles that the media needs to understand.

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