

Newspaper Journalism in Kerala in the Era of New Media

Communication & Journalism Research
4 (1&2) p 115 - 125
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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

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Abstract

The article explores the ethics and professionalism in newspaper journalism in the era of new media focusing on various incidents occurred in Kerala. The article raises questions on honest, trustworthy, fair and courage of our journalists in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Do they seek truth and report it accurately. How independent are they and free of obligations to any interest other than the public's right to know and How accountable and responsible are they to their readers are addressed.

Keywords

Newspaper journalism, new media, professionalism

Introduction

A newspaper is the mirror of the society. A journalist's task is to directly reflect the world to the reader, without distortions or biases that will alter the "real" view. As watchdogs of democracy and "custodians of conscience," journalists ought to expose misdemeanor and transgressions, and illuminate solutions to public ills.

The Hutchins Commission (1942-1947) that steered an official inquiry into the role of the media in a modern democracy identified five obligations of journalism as a profession (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947)

1. A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning;
2. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
3. The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups of society;
4. The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society;
5. Full access to the day's intelligence.

Today ethical journalism is on the verge of a collapse across the world. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ), a research organization in

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America, in its critical evaluation of the performance of the news media said, journalists are “sloppier, less professional, less moral, less caring, more biased, less honest about their mistakes. The public retained a deep scepticism about what they see, hear and read in the media” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2015)

McChesney (2010) asserts: “The days when journalism was a public service directed at the entire population are... long gone. Today much of journalism is increasingly directed at the middle class and the upper class while the working class and the poor have been written off altogether.”

ISRO espionage case 1994

The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) espionage case of 1994 in Kerala, the sensational concocted story was the worst instance of journalism ebbed out to the rock bottom in Kerala. The major allegation was against S. Nambi Narayanan, a scientist at the Indian Space Research Organization. He was accused of handing over drawings and documents relating to the Viking engine and cryogenic technology to foreign/enemy countries in exchange for large amounts of money in US dollars and that these took place at three different locations (Chennai, Bangalore and Thiruvananthapuram) in January, June and September 1994. The detailed investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) established that the alleged meetings between the accused never took place, that no documents were seized from or transferred to anyone, that no documents or original drawings connected with the cryogenic and the Viking engines were lost or missing, and that, no money transactions ever took place (Nair, 1999).

The chain of events began on October 20, 1994, with the arrest of Mariam Rasheeda, a Maldivian woman held up in India due to the cancellation of Indian Airlines flights following the plague scare. A case of overstay was registered against her. But the following day, *Desabhimani* newspaper in Malayalam reported the arrest as a crackdown on a spy-ring operating from ISRO. The story took a new turn with *Kerala Kaumudi*, another Malayalam newspaper, naming Raman Srivastava, the then Inspector General (IG, South Zone), as the kingpin of the spy-ring. Kerala police then enlarged the spy-ring beyond Mariam Rasheeda to register a case of espionage against Fauziya Hassan, another Maldivian, K. Chandrasekhar, the representative of Glavkosmos in India, S.K. Sharma, a Bangalore-based labour contractor, S. Nambi Narayanan and D. Sasikumaran, ISRO scientists. The cases were handed over to a special Investigation Team headed by Siby Mathews IPS.

On December 2, 1994, the cases were transferred to the CBI, after Siby Mathews had put it on record that the Kerala police was ill-equipped to investigate the espionage case. On the basis of a ruling by a Division Bench of the High Court of Kerala that Raman Srivastava had links with the spy-ring, Srivastava was suspended. At the political level, the ruling triggered a coup led by K. Karunakaran’s arch rival A.K. Antony with the overt support of the press in Kerala, which saw the exit of Karunakaran from Chief Ministership that paved the way for his long political exile. But on May 2, 1996, the Chief Judicial Magistrate,

Ernakulum, absolved all the accused and declared that the case was false and baseless, fabricated and planted (Nair, 1999).

After *Kerala Kaumudi* 'implicated' Raman Srivastava in the ISRO espionage case as an exclusive news on October 21, 1994, allegedly as a retaliatory move against him for the implementation of the High Court order with the police force replacing its editor and managing director M.S. Mani with M.S. Madhusoodanan, the other newspapers came out with their own concocted 'scoops' to survive in the fierce circulation war that prevailed in Kerala (Nair, 1999).

Sooryanelli sex scandal case 2003

Sajidev (2003) in an experimental study examined whether the sensationalized coverage of Sooryanelli sex scandal in Kerala in 1996, alleging the involvement of the former Union Minister and deputy chairman of Rajya Sabha, Prof. P. J. Kurien, had created a distorted image of the accused among the electorates of Kerala (In fact, Kerala High Court exonerated Prof. P. J. Kurien and Supreme Court confirmed the acquittal in 2007). A questionnaire based on 5-point-Likert-type scale was administered to measure the attitude of the control group respondents with the experimental group of respondents who were given published documents that gave detailed information on the investigation reports absolving Prof. P. J. Kurien. The study found that the differences between the two groups were statistically significant proving that the newspapers had failed to present facts in their entirety on his acquittal as convincingly as the allegations of his involvement in the scandal were reported.

Case of solar scam and Saritha 2013

Media in Kerala had crossed the boundaries of ethical journalism while covering the 2013 solar panel scam involving a fraudulent solar energy company, Team Solar, which used two glamorous women Saritha S. Nair and Shalu Menon to create political contacts with links even to the Chief Minister's office, to dupe several influential people in Kerala. In fact, A.P. Abdullakutty, one of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) representing the constituency of Kannur, who had been in the shade of sexual allegations levelled by Saritha S. Nair had to plead with the media to let him and his family live peacefully. In an appeal to the media he wrote:

I was subjected to a harrowing and unfair media assault. A section of the media engaged in witch-hunt and nobody cared that I too have a family and two small children. We were on the verge of suicide. Nobody cared to listen to me. My children wouldn't go to school in Thiruvananthapuram as they could not stand the taunts and teasing. My wife, a dentist, stopped practising in a private dental hospital (Media hounding me, 2014).

Need and significance of the study

Despite the upsurge in newspaper circulation across the country, the credibility of newspapers is heavily on the wane. The Press Council of India Sub-Committee Report (2010) on paid news syndrome identified several factors for the breakdown of journalism as a noble profession in the recent past:

- Increasing concentration of ownership;
- Higher levels of manipulation of news, analysis, and comment to suit the owners' financial and political interests;
- The downgrading and devaluing of editorial functions and content;
- The growing willingness within newspapers to tailor the editorial product to subserve advertising and marketing goals set by owners and senior management personnel;
- Hyper-commercialization;
- Price wars and aggressive practices in the home bases of other newspapers to overwhelm and kill competition;
- Private treaties with corporates that undermine the independence and value of news;
- Rogue practices like paid news and bribe-taking for favourable coverage (Press Council of India Sub-Committee reports on paid news, n.d.).

Against this backdrop the investigator was prompted to ponder over the following questions related to ethical issues in newspaper journalism:

1. How honest, trustworthy, fair and courageous are our journalists in Kerala in gathering, reporting and interpreting information? Do they seek truth and report it accurately?
2. How independent are our journalists? How free are they, of obligations to any interest other than the public's right to know?
3. How accountable and responsible are they to their readers?

In seeking answers to the questions posed above, the investigator held in-depth interviews with the editorial heads of four mainstream newspapers in Kerala, and with the chairman of Kerala Press Academy:

1. Thomas Jacob, Editorial Director, *MalayalaManorama*
2. M. KesavaMenon, Editor-in-Chief, *Mathrubhumi*
3. C. Gouridasan Nair, Resident Editor (Kerala), *The Hindu*
4. Vinod Mathew, Resident Editor (Kerala), *The New Indian Express*
5. N.P. Rajendran, Former Chairman, Kerala Press Academy

Issue of credibility of newspapers and journalists in Kerala

The editors of these four newspapers and the former Chairman of Kerala Press Academy admitted that there had been corrosion in the credibility of journalists perceived by the public. The onslaught of 24-hour television news channels and the wide popularity of the web portals that thrive primarily on titillating news were

identified as major reasons for the trustworthiness deficit. Fierce competition among newspapers to raise their circulation had casualties in quality journalism. Yet, the seasoned journalists in Kerala categorically declared that an overwhelming majority of journalists were committed and credible, that the deviations of low-profile journalism were all exceptions, and that newspapers were still depended on by the public as a credible medium.

Vinod Mathew from *The New Indian Express* says, “If the journalists were to be less trustworthy and the newspapers had lost their credibility, the circulation of newspapers would have dwindled in Kerala. If journalists are not trusted, newspapers won’t sell. The upsurge in the circulation of newspapers reflects the confidence the readers have in the journalists as reliable sources of information.”

Vinod adds, “The journalists the public used to seeing are those on 24-hour news channels. The reporters and the news anchors on television by and large are verbally aggressive. Television news frequently has a sensationalist mode. This leaves negative notions about journalism and journalists in the viewers. It has affected the image of journalists detrimentally.”

Thomas Jacob from *Malayala Manorama* said, “Newspapers are more ethically seasoned than 24-hour news channels because newspapering has 170 years of history. Television has been in existence only about 20 years and the ethical system is still evolving. Newspapers give the freshers who join, a minimum of two years of intensive in-house training, familiarising them with the ethical norms and equipping them with the required tips to make a sound judgment on news packaging. Such a lengthy supervised internal training is yet to become a reality in television news arena.”

Thomas Jacob has high esteem for journalists in Kerala. He says, “In Kerala, journalists at large are ethically sound in their mode of operation. But the stigma brought in by a handful of journalists like BarkhaDutt indirectly linked with the 2G spectrum scam, has a negative bearing on the image and credibility of journalists.

On the issue of credibility of newspapers, C. Gouridasan Nair from *The Hindu* made the following assertions: “Newspapering is a very complex and composite process. It is not within an individual’s control. Every newspaper has a system and a structure. It is within a well-established organizational setting that journalists work. A judgment on the performance of journalists should be made realistically from a comprehensive perspective. What matters ultimately is the working culture and climate that exists in the news organization. A journalist has no personal priorities and therefore, he is bound to abide by the policy and precedence of the organization that he has become part of.”

Gouridasan Nair adds, “Any venture that involves capital investment, human resources, structure and revenue is an industry. Newspapering requires capital and human resources. It functions with a finely-tuned structure. It is an

industry, as in the case of hospitals and schools. Journalists are one of the components of an industry.”

Gouridasan Nair reiterates, “Today no newspaper or television channel has monopoly over truth. With a wide array of information sources, each giving different versions of truth, the earlier perception of a single newspaper claiming to have the absolute possession of truth no longer exists. People have wider exposure to the realities across the world particularly with the plethora of television news channels and web portals.”

M. KesavaMenon from *Mathrubhumim* made a scathing attack on 24-hour news channels for bringing down the standard of journalism in Kerala. He says, “A newspaper has 24 hours to shape the story verifying facts and ensuring accuracy. Because of vicious competition, speed prevails over accuracy on television news channels. Whatever is reported by journalists is telecast as breaking news. Most of the controversies are generated by television news channels. Newspapers are under pressure from television channels to give their follow-up. Such a trend naturally erodes credibility of journalists.”

Kesava Menon affirms emphatically, “We do not report news just because it is covered by the news channels. We confirm the authenticity of the information from credible sources and delve into their implications from multifarious dimensions. Only after having filtered by the various gatekeepers from reporter to bureau chief to news editor to chief subeditor to subeditor to the proof reader in the sieves of truth and objectivity that a news is packaged in a newspaper.”

Complementing the views expressed by KesavaMenon, the feedback from N.P. Rajendran was stronger, “A 24-hour news channel can thrive only where there is surplus of news with wide geographical coverage with stories flowing from across the country or the world. In a small State like Kerala where the population is confined to just 33.39 million, there is absolutely no scope for a 24-hour news channel. There are six full-fledged 24-hour Malayalam television channels in Kerala, each of them in cut throat race battling for a better television rating point. There is the key problem of shortage of news to feed the viewers throughout the day. Therefore, news is ‘generated’, controversies are ‘created’, events and issues are ‘hyped’, and the insignificant and the trivial are made ‘vital’. News analysis gets relegated to pure verbal gymnastics.”

Rajendran adds, “This trend is a setback to quality journalism. Television news channels today set the agenda; they fix the lead and the headlines. In as much as people are dependent on television for news, a counter news packaging is a staggering task. Journalists are aware of the casualties and constraints in their profession. But they are helpless in as much as individuals are powerless. Only collective moves can bring in the desired change.”

According to Gouridasan Nair, “Accuracy is an area where newspapers are far ahead of television news channels. People trust newspapers more than the television. There is greater depth in newspaper content. Broader enquiries are made into the issues and events covered in newspaper. That is the reason why there had not been shrinkage in the circulation of newspapers despite the array of 24-hour news channels. Newspapers do not jump into conclusions. Television always goes for breaking news and runs after inconsequential matters. Newspapers stick to facts and are never carried away by trivialities.

As Thomas Jacob points out, “A newspaper that masks truths will be rejected by the readers. Readers are well-informed and intellectually sharp enough to identify the deficiencies and flaws in editorial content. Readers can easily detect subjectivity and partisan stance in news as they depend also on the competitors for comprehensive information.”

Issue of sensationalization

Sensationalization is observed when newspapers blow up crime stories, use puffed-up headlines, intrude into personal grief for exclusives, and resort to mucky content. The editors of the four newspapers in this study owned up some lapses in the past and categorically declared that sensationalist mode of news programming was a very rare occurrence. The bombardment of 24-hour television news fair was highlighted as the key factor exerting a negative influence on mainstream newspapers.

Kerala’s former Minister for Forests, K. B. Ganesh Kumar’s skirmish with his wife Dr. Yamini in April 2013 was reported violating the key principles of moral propriety. Dr. Yamini’s allegations of domestic violence and Ganesh Kumar’s counter charges of blackmailing and manhandling were played up by the newspapers with lurid details.

On the issue of sensationalization of news, Thomas Jacob says, “Even if a newspaper decides to exercise restraint in reporting sensitive and sensational issues, there is a heavy pressure to toe the line of the rival media. When a story is killed on account of ethical issues and the same story is reported in rival news organizations, it is misinterpreted as a decision taken because of vested interests or under pressure from the powerful.”

Quoting an example, Thomas Jacob, says, “In February 2014, *Holy hell: A Memoir of Faith, Devotion and Pure Madness*, written by Australia-born Gail Tredwell, a former disciple of a Hindu spiritual guru, Mata Amritanandamayi, sparked a controversy over its allegedly explosive content. We did not sensationalize the issue.

Vinod Mathew contended that *The New Indian Express* had judiciously reported the scandals linked with cricketer Sreesanth and film actress Shwetha Menon.

Commenting on the consequences of sensationalization Kesava Menon said: "Sensationalization of news is a short-cut journalism. We can woo readers only for a short span with such gimmicks. No newspaper can have a long-term growth with tabloidization. Readers of substance can be sustained with only quality journalism."

Gouridasan Nair has a very positive evaluation of newspaper journalism in Kerala. He says, "There is a serious newspaper reading culture in Kerala. The readers have a refined mindset. The mainstream newspapers follow a dignified editorial policy. Invasion of privacy was too frequent earlier. The worst was when journalists intruded into grief-stricken members of the family struck by an unprecedented tragedy. Today's journalism is accompanied by human touch. It was a collective decision taken by the newspapers never to carry family suicide on the front page. But television is now encroaching civility. We present the readers what they need to know, not what they like to read. No crime stories carry lurid details. We follow a level-headed journalism."

Issue of Commercialization

A newspaper that falls back on advertorials, engages in circulation war, functions subservient to the owner's economic interests and serves as a lapdog of those in power is driven by commercialization.

The Hindu carried an editor's note on the front page on April 24, 2012 giving clarifications to the readers on a jacket in the form of an in-house advertisement endorsing a superstition connected with *Akshaya Tritiya* celebration in Hinduism. Siddharth Varadarajan, the then editor declared that neither the editor nor anyone from the editorial side was involved in the drafting of the message, nor did they know of, let alone approve, its contents. It was not *The Hindu's* editorial position that *Akshaya Tritiya* was one of the most auspicious days in the Hindu religion and that buying gold on that day would make people prosperous throughout the year, he wrote. An assurance was also given to the readers that internal steps were taken to ensure that advertising messages put out in the name of *The Hindu* are consistent with its editorial policy and code of editorial values. Readers were given a word that the firm line between the business operations of the Company and editorial operations and content will be strictly adhered to by all in the future.

When the IIPM (The Indian Institute of Planning and Management), Delhi released advertisements claiming that *The Hindu* had termed it as a B-school with a human face, Siddharth Varadarajan was quick to respond with an editor's note on March 25, 2013: "*The Hindu* hereby would like to make it clear to current and prospective students of IIPM that it has not made any such editorial endorsement of the institution. We have now formally written to IIPM asking it to refrain from

repeating the claim, and putting it on notice of our intent to proceed suitably against it if it persists in doing so” (Panneerselvan, 2013).

Commenting on these two incidents, Gouridasan Nair says, “*The Hindu* went to the extent of giving an editor’s note on the front page because it is a newspaper that thrives on ethical principles. It is a reflection of the conviction of the management that the newspaper is ultimately accountable to the readers who have placed their trust in its contents.”

Thomas Jacob spoke about the indispensability of advertisements for the survival of a newspaper. He said, “In the past, there had been a strong resistance to advertisements from the part of the readers. But today the readers are reconciled to the reality to advertisements because they know the running expenses of the newspaper cannot be met with the pittance received as subscription from the readers. The introduction of jacket advertisements had irritated the readers in the beginning. But with every newspaper going for jacket advertisements quite frequently, readers have now learnt to live with it as a necessary evil.”

Reinforcing this reality, Vinod Mathew adds, “A newspaper has to be made economically viable. It is the responsibility of the editorial department to make it sellable with content that is tailored for the readers. Advertisements are the major source of income to make the newspaper affordable for the readers.”

Kesava Menon recommends a proper balance: “Newspapers are also driven by profit motive. Newspapering is not a charitable enterprise. It involves heavy financial investment and human resources. But no compromises are made to protect the commercial interests to the detriment of the readers. No demands are placed on the editorial department to plant or to slant stories to augment the commercial interests of the sister concerns of the newspaper management. Maintaining equilibrium in news and advertisement is an ongoing struggle. Both the news and the marketing departments in a newspaper have to work in partnership.

Recommendations for improving the ethical standards

1. A collective move from the part of the editorial heads of newspapers, 24-hour television news channels and web portals is required to formulate a common editorial policy to tackle the issue of sensationalism in the programming of news for restoring the credibility of journalists among the public.
2. A consensus has to be sought jointly by the editorial and managerial heads of the newspapers on the frequency of jacket advertisements and on the policy of advertorials appearing in newshole to deter commercialization ruling the roost.

3. The in-house training in ethics being carried out in newspapers should be enhanced with a proper blend of in-depth theory and regular practice.
4. A periodic assessment of the quality of journalism reflected in newspapers should be made jointly by the newspaper editors for corrective action.

Conclusion

The responses from the editors of the four mainstream newspapers in Kerala validate the hazards of sensationalist and commercial mode of operation in newspaper journalism in Kerala in the age of new media. Collective action is required from newspapers to counter frivolous journalism and tabloidization of broadsheet journalism. The consequent erosion of credibility calls for a greater sense of ethical sensitivity and accountability from the part of journalists in their profession.

Similar sentiments of the editors in Kerala have also been shared by Kuldip Nayar (2012), India's celebrated journalist:

Journalism as a profession has changed a great deal from what it was in our times. I feel an acute sense of disappointment, not only because it has deteriorated in quality and direction but also because I do not see journalists attempting to revive the values once practised... what appals me most is that editorial primacy has been sacrificed at the altar of commercialism and vested interests. It hurts to see many journalists bending backwards to remain handmaidens of the proprietors, on the one hand, and of the establishment, on the other. This is so different from what we were used to (Nayar, 2012).

Nayar laments that journalism is now a profession merely for a livelihood for a significant number:

I have known journalists leaving one newspaper for another to improve their prospects but can count on the fingers of one hand those who resigned on a point of principle. There was a time when journalists preferred resignation to regimentation... Journalists have for their part reconciled themselves to the situation of being at the mercy of proprietors... What has disappointed me most is the compromise that journalists make to advance their careers. Indeed, success has become synonymous with passiveness. If you know how to get along, you advance in life and begin to believe that talent does not matter, but conformism does... The rule, 'I sing the song of him whose bread I eat', sums up their philosophy (Nayar, 2012).

The views expressed by the editors are quite compatible with the declaration of T.J.S George: “Newspapering was a mission until 1947. It necessarily had to become a profession. In fact it became an industry, in the worst sense of the term” (George, 2007).

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