

Reporting for Human Rights : Issues & Challenges

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to highlight role of media in vocalizing the important issues and challenges on Human rights. The paper will focus on the important themes such as, importance of media in representing Human rights issues in the society. It will proceed on to highlight the problem of sources pertaining to NGOs, Association and Churches etc which even confuses the audience in defining the exact demarcation of Human rights and also the existence of politics of representation from every angle of agencies. Lastly an attempt will be made on how these different agencies have to understand the concept and to bring forth effective recommendation for a better reporting of human rights issues by the media.

Keywords: Media, News, Newspaper, Newsworthy, Technology, Journalism, Human Rights, Mizoram.

Introduction

In this Global village - a world of media, where different mediums play an important role in each and every issue, reporting for human rights is becoming a challenge and of course it is the selling point for every news media, whether it be print, visual or the news media. The media appears to give more attention to human rights issues than they did (however insufficient their coverage may seem to some observers), but the reasons may be deceptively complex. Like all other places, in Mizoram, added coverage is due partly to the fact that governments and political leaders refer to human rights more often than they did even ten years ago, both in

their formal statements of policy and in political rhetoric. Public opinion has similarly evolved. For these reasons, the amount of coverage of human rights issues in the media is likely to continue to rise. For similar reasons, there may be higher expectations about the precision of that coverage and the quality of that transmission.

Human rights as news topic

In recent years, it has become apparent to observers as well as practitioners of Mass Communications that human rights are more newsworthy than it was. The media have become interested not only in violations of human

rights, but in the institutional apparatus that has been designed to promote and protect human rights (Stanley Cohen, 1995). This is partly due to the fact that many governments, NGO'S, political parties, state, national and international institutions have integrated human rights principles into their policy frameworks. For eg – All the political parties namely Indian National Congress of Mizoram (INC), Mizo National Front (MNF), Zoram Nationalist Party (ZNP), Mizoram People's Conference (MPC) etc, and NGOs like Young Mizo Association (YMA), Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl (MHIP), Mizoram Upa Pawl (MUP), Church Youth Organisations like Kristian Thalai Pawl (KTP), Thalai Kristian Pawl (TKP), Catholic Thalai Pawl (CTP), Salvation Army Youth (SAY), Pentecostal Youth Department (PYD) etc and many other organisations, association which exist today, have one way or the other in their manifesto, policy, rules & regulation or objectives in protecting the so called rights of their members and association.

Covering Human Rights Issues

From the media's point of view, is human rights issue news in their own right, or are they news only when they are associated with other news? It should be stated at the outset that news organisations and the media collectively can say a great deal about human rights, but they have no inherent obligation to say everything. They have to select and have no duty to privilege human rights stories over others (United Nations, 1997)

According to a study done in 2002 in London, United Kingdom the report shows that though journalists have expanded coverage of human rights issues into new areas, many human rights issues are under-reported. Issues that are less visible, or slow processes, are covered rarely. Human rights are still taken largely to mean political and civil rights, and the importance of economic, social and cultural rights is ignored widely by the media in their coverage of economic issues, including the international economy, poverty, inequity and social and economic discrimination.

The media and human rights

There are two main points of intersection between the worlds of the media and human rights. One is the considerable degree of overlap of subject matter between the two areas. Many reporting directly or indirectly have human rights content. The other is the fact that freedom of the media is itself a human right. The media are regarded conventionally as one of the mechanisms by which citizens hold their governments to account. To take the second point of intersection first: the emergence of the first widely circulated newspapers coincided almost exactly with the development of Enlightenment ideas of human rights. (International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002). In Democracy, like our very own set up here at our state Mizoram, the Press is the fourth Pillar next to executive, legislature and judiciary. At stake are two sets of rights: that of the media to report

and express opinions as they see fit, and that of the people to get accurate and critical information regarding the actions of those in power. Other rights may be involved too — for example, those of opposition politicians who need the media to disseminate their opinions. In theory and to a large extent in practice the freedom of the media to go about their business without interference is held to guarantee all these interlocking rights.

The media industry is growing in leaps and bounds. It has gathered an unbelievable momentum and the credit goes to all pillars – media, advertising, public relations, corporate communication etc. Of late, media is focusing more into sensation. It's all about hype and circulation figures. It has become a commercial tool to make money, earn huge profits and influence people and government.

The communication revolution

Recent political, social and economic changes have made human rights issues more complex to frame in media terms. Previously, information on human rights was news in the sense that systemic problems could be presented in individual terms, and action (appeals, intervention, and so on) could be advocated or reported. (David Held, 1997)

The communications revolution is affecting lifestyles and the organisation of social life globally. It is also changing the way human rights are perceived and reported. Newspaper coverage of some

recent event— like the Bru problems in Mizoram seemed to lead and influence the responses of the national public and even the central government. Yet human rights violations have been stories since the early age of the mass media. These reports have often been difficult to separate from propaganda, which has an even longer history. News of abuses and its use to influence and manipulate policy and public opinion has a long past, and news organisations have always accepted that information about many issues now called human rights are 'newsworthy'.

The impact of technology

Technology is a tool that, in itself, is neither good nor bad. However, it can be put to positive or harmful use, and changes in technology have consistently generated widespread political, economic and social consequences that were never foreseen and that political authorities were not able to control. The impact of technology on the communications industries in recent decades has been far reaching. After mass production of the book (1400) came railways (1800), the telegraph (1850), the telephone (1900), radio (1910), the aeroplane (1920s), the motor vehicle and moving pictures (1930s), television (1950s) and computers (1960s). Each invention (and others might be listed) transformed the production or communication of information. Computers have already passed through several phases of innovation. The Internet emerged in the 1970s and is now sweeping

the world which has reached even our state, one of the remotest places from Central India. Satellite communications are transforming private and business communication (cellular telephones, satellite television and so on) and have profoundly altered the reporting of news. The introduction of fibre-optic cables in the 1980s multiplied exponentially the amounts of information that can be transmitted down telephone lines. The introduction of digital broadcasting (radio and TV) will greatly expand the number of television and radio channels that consumers can receive. Technological change and its impact on communications are set to continue. The advent of audiovisual educational materials will change education. Students are likely to read fewer books and absorb more information audio visually or today even through internet. By and large, most innovations in the field of communication have had positive effects overall because they have increased access to information — and this is almost always beneficial. (International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002).

In the coming years, the highest need will not be to find information but to make good judgements about what information is useful and what conclusions may be drawn from it. Likewise, because of technology the excess of information on human rights issues become doubtful and we find it difficult to understand and perceive it in a right and correct manner.

Ignorance of what human rights are

Within journalism there is a serious lack of knowledge of what human rights are. Many journalists like many politicians and others working in civil society are not familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties and mechanisms. Often they do not understand the difference between human rights law and the laws of war. As a result, human rights are often erroneously regarded as relevant only to reporting of conflict. Lack of familiarity with human rights standards leads some journalists to fear that, if they integrate human rights into their report, these may become politically biased. In fact, the contrary is likely to be true: knowledge of human rights will make most reports fairer. Given that human rights have become to such a large degree a language of international relations, the media have a professional obligation to understand what these rights are, in order to be able to portray and better explain the world to their audience.

In recent times, in our state Mizoram, we had issues where the biggest NGO the Young Mizo Association (YMA) fought to demolish liquor and drug trafficking. According to the YMA it is their right and duty to punish the people involved in it, whereas the victims, considered it their right to appeal to the court for judgement. This has many a time caused confusion for the media about which, where and what to cover as human right stories.

Recommendations

The International Council on Human Rights have made some points of recommendation which can be followed all over the world for a better reporting of human rights issues.

To journalists, editors and media organisations

1. Journalists should be given opportunities to become better informed about international human rights instruments. This can best be done through a range of awareness raising activities including:

a) specific pre-entry courses on human rights issues for individuals attending journalism schools (as part of the curriculum);

b) mid-career and in-house training on international human rights standards, including national perspectives on human rights law and policy;

c) internal editorial programmes to review coverage of human rights issues; e.g. refugee and asylum matters, rights of children, racism and racial discrimination, gender policy, health issues; and

d) Actions to promote exchanges of views between journalists and human rights organisations at national, regional and international level. Such meetings, briefings and seminars should be organised by journalism schools, media organisations and journalists' professional groups.

2. Media organisations and journalist groups should promote higher standards

of diversity within the newsroom while strengthening the capacity of journalists to work professionally and in secure conditions. Media should build public confidence in the quality of information they circulate. Practical steps could include:

a) the adoption of employment and recruitment policies that promote ethnic and gender balance in the newsroom;

b) actions by media organisations to improve the safety of media staff, including freelance employees, through appropriate forms of hostile environment and risk-awareness training and provision of appropriate technical equipment;

c) Regular updating of editorial reporting, editing and style handbooks and materials to familiarise journalists and editing staff with human rights terminology and to reinforce ethical principles in reporting human rights issues. These should take account of guidelines from journalists' professional groups on rights issues, such as reporting on children, intolerance and hate speech;

d) encouragement of professional co-operation between reporters and correspondents working for different media in different regions to better understand local conditions and to develop a more informed, diverse and reliable network of information sources;

e) Forms of self-regulation strengthened to build public confidence and to help journalists to examine critically their practices and frameworks

for covering human rights. Structures for self-regulation must be independent and must provide an accessible bridge between media, journalists and the people they serve.

To governments and international organisations

1. Governments should commit themselves to eliminating all forms of official interference in the work of journalists and should remove all obstacles to the exercise of free media.
2. Where public funding of media exists — for instance, in state or public broadcasting or through the printed press — safeguards should be incorporated into regulations to ensure that there is no political interference or conflicts of interest and that the editorial independence of journalists is guaranteed.
3. Governments should provide open access to official information and should train official spokespersons on the need to provide media with up-to-date and reliable information relating to human rights obligations.
4. The right of journalists to act ethically should be protected and enhanced through, for instance, recognition of the right of journalists to protect their sources and protection from dismissal or disciplinary action for acting according to professional conscience.
5. Intergovernmental organisations should develop more effective and more integrated programmes of assistance to encourage media excellence in the

reporting of human rights issues, particularly through co-ordinated assistance programmes to media in developing countries;

6. Confidence-building measures to promote high standards through, for example, the sponsorship of research activities, journalism prizes and liaison between international media and local media outlets.

To human rights organisations

1. Journalists, the media and human rights organisations play distinct and different, but equally, vital roles in creating open societies that are able to defend and promote fundamental rights. To play their parts effectively, journalist groups, media and human rights organisations need to better understand their different roles and responsibilities. Human rights organisations can contribute to this process by:

a) promoting internal discussion among human rights activists on the work of media and journalists;

b) establishing direct contact with journalists' groups and media organisations to discuss media-related rights issues and ways in which both groups can co-operate to create better legal, political and social conditions for the exercise of journalism;

c) organising joint meetings with media organisations and journalists to discuss concerns about human rights coverage and how to co-operate in

providing accurate and reliable information on human rights questions;

d) Suggesting confidence-building measures to promote better understanding of the human rights agenda through, for example, the sponsorship of national journalism prizes and research grants to journalists working on human rights stories.

(International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2002).

Conclusion

The importance of media and its effect cannot be neglected today. Media is omnipresent in our world. As the increase of media reporting various issues such as reporting for human rights issue, it becomes an alarming call for media agencies to have proper and professional training to understand the concept and to bring forth effective recommendation for a better reporting.

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