

Media in the Time of Kleptocracy

Kunda Dixit

In journalism schools they teach you that when a dog bites man that is not news. And sure enough, on the plane over here I read a news item about an Australian man coming home from a pub who bit off the tip of his pet Alsatian's left ear. The dog was rushed to a vet where he was making satisfactory progress. It is man bites dog makes headlines.

My journalism professor has a very blunt approach to news. He used to say news has to sell otherwise it is not news. And it is this traditional definition that largely defines what is news today. According to this definition there are three Ns that make an event newsworthy:

- a) **New.** Anything out of ordinary, trains that collide make news not the thousands of others that reach their destinations safely.
- b) **Negative.** Crime sells better than philanthropy. "Headless body found in topless bar."
- c) **Near.** Only events that occur within the perimeter of the observer's interest is interesting.

To these three we can add a fourth:

- d) **North.** The rich and powerful countries makes news, not the South. And within countries, it is the rich and powerful class who make news. The weak and meek, the minorities, the women, the underclass do not make news.

It is in this reality of the news business that corruption has to somehow fit in. Corruption is so common today that most editors, reflecting the public mood, do not regard it as news anymore. Corruption has become dog bites man. Both journalists and the public have become cynical or apathetic about corruption. Fatalists see corruption, like death, as inevitable. Pragmatists see it as actually desirable in countries where bureaucratic tangles paralyse decision-making, and graft is a lubricant that oils the machinery of government and keeps it turning.

So, corruption is not news, because it is not new. And what is worrying is that some don't even see it as particularly negative either. As one Sri Lankan businessman told me: "Everyone accepts bribery as a necessity. It is like a tip." Some developing countries in Asia seem to be trying to emulate the "constructive corruption" that built the economies of Taiwan, South Korea and Japan after the war: that incestuous relationship between big business and pork barrel politics that paved the way for protectionist growth. But in all three countries today we see a move away from crony capitalism towards transparent and accountable governance.

Sadly, it is in South Asia with its fragile democracies, that corruption stands as an

obstacle to progress. And it is here that the power of the media and a free press is most important in making government more honest, accountable and efficient. The media must not only act as the fourth pillar for our tottering democracies, but also support the other three pillars.

And for those who say that things were better in the bad old days of dictatorship—the trains ran on time, there was less garbage and corruption was less rampant—there is only one message. We tried totalitarianism, too, and it failed miserably.

The most effective weapon against graft is information and publicity. Corruption is like fungus, it thrives in dark and secretive places. I will present our experience in putting the shine back on corruption so it can be newsworthy again.

1. The power of media.

Many countries that emerged from dictatorships in the past decade or so have not used all the freedoms granted by their new constitutions. Hard-won freedoms have been squandered, and the media's potential in fostering transparency and accountability in government has often not been used. Status quo publishers have simply switched sides to be the propaganda arm for whichever government is in power, commercial-minded ones have taken the low road to boost circulation through sensationalist coverage that has undermined media's own image and credibility. Media in young democracies behaves less like a watchdog and more like a lapdog.

In some South Asian countries, like India, which have a vibrant tradition of a free press, we see commercialisation of media eroding some of its public service role. Business and political interest of the owners have often impinged on and slanted coverage in the past five years. Other institutions, like the Supreme Court, have taken the lead in exposing corruption, which the media has followed up on. The idle banter of satellite television are too distracted by the operational strategy of day-to-day politics to delve into what politics should be all about. There is a nostalgia for the glorious age of India's famous muckrakers who exposed prison blindings and investigated graft in high places.

The glitz of printing and television technology dazzles us and takes our attention away from what the media should really be doing. With a few exceptions, media's power to catalyse reforms has been underutilised. And if this is the case in India, which has the longest tradition of free press in South Asia, the situation elsewhere in the region is even less encouraging.

2. Think locally, act accordingly

It is at the local level that the pain of corruption is felt most and that is where media must make the difference. Villagers and the urban poor often do not make the link between shoddy government services (lack of basic health care, schools, housing) and thievery at the national and provincial capitals. It is the role of the journalist to make this link so people know who the crooks are, so the same crooks do not keep being elected

them to public office.

The role of the media is mainly that of a communicator. To make information relevant, interesting and accessible to the mass public, journalists should select the kind of media that has the reach. In my own country, Nepal and the rest of South Asia, no other medium today has the reach of local language radio. Governments have understood this, and this is why even in countries like India with a long tradition of free press, the radio waves are still shackled by outdated and irrelevant regulations.

Elsewhere in South Asia, we see power of radio almost completely ignored or wasted by the government and by private media. Radio is either used as a public address system by the government of the day or, as in the case of FM, as a totally entertainment-driven medium with wall-to-wall music and mindless chatter.

Media-driven public sector reform also has to come from local language media. It must be the Hindi, the Urdu, the Sinhala, Bengali or Nepali press that carry the credible and investigative pieces so that the non-English speakers are as well informed as the readers of the English-language press. In many of our countries, the English press is elitist and preaches to the converted.

There are winds of change: the proliferation of non-English magazines and newspapers in southern India, the high-quality election coverage in Hindi satellite channels, the reforms in media legislation in Nepal and Bangladesh that have allowed public sector radio and television.

And the example in Nepal of using radio for development through innovative news, current affairs and interactive programming via nationwide shortwave. A recent programme broadcast the allocation in the national budget for all the districts in Nepal. Such information had never been broadcast before, and it provoked a tremendous reaction of citizens who started querying local legislators about money meant for their districts. In many countries, people are poor because they are information poor. Corruption has always thrived in secrecy, access to information and making basic facts public is the first line of defence.

3. Graft is unsustainable

In many South Asian countries, the main industry is “development”. Foreign aid is the largest contributor to the budget and some countries have almost their entire development budget funded from outside sources. Kickbacks and payoffs have long been a part of the “aid” business, and has been harder to investigate because, unlike other industries it has an aura of altruism. Billions of dollars and four decades later, there are more poor people in South Asia today than four decades ago. Need we say more? Where did this money come from and where did it go?

One of the tenets of investigative reporting is to “follow the paper trail”. If you followed the paper trail of development aid, you’d uncover some pretty nasty stuff. You would uncover the “corruption quadrangle”—that nefarious nexus between the governments of donor countries and the multinational based there with the government of

the recipient country and the local business agent of the multinational. The brokers then go to work, enticing officials with luscious kickbacks to approve large infrastructure projects, then lobby with their own governments to facilitate the loans from a consortium of international development banks to build them with. Why are we so surprised when aid has not been able to reduce poverty?

These are the “development merchants”—those who sell large, inappropriate, wasteful and unaffordable dams, costly superhighways, needless disastrous resettlement schemes, or polluting power plants when the country’s needs and priorities are completely different. Large projects carry large kickbacks and are infinitely more attractive to the donor and the recipient. In many donor countries, tied aid is not a bad word. Jobs for a faltering construction industry is used by donor governments to justify foreign charity to an ill-informed domestic electorate.

The best example I know of a corruption quadrangle that was foiled by incisive and professional media coverage was the Arun III Hydro-electric Project in Nepal. Led by the World Bank, a consortium of bilateral donors all tried to push Nepal to build a stupendously-expensive 202 megawatt scheme that would cost as much as Nepal’s annual budget, and if built the electricity would be too expensive for its people to afford.

Media not just exposed the unseemly lobbying by the embassies in Kathmandu of the so-called “donors” to get the project approved by a pliant and corrupt home government, but it also quoted international hydropower experts who said Arun III was a blunder when so many less-costly and more appropriate smaller alternatives were available. The sheer power of this argument finally won the day, and the World Bank pulled out of the project in 1994. Since then, Nepal has become the first country in the region to allow private sector into its hydropower industry, in place of Arun III six medium-scale plants are under construction which will produce twice as much power, be ready in half the time, and cost considerably less.

4. A new media paradigm

As we saw from the previous example, corruption in high places pushes policies and decisions that are environmentally unsound and economically unsustainable. Graft is a short-term action, many of countries need long-term policies. But traditional media role of reporting just the facts is not suited to counter this. A reactive media comes in only when the damage is done, to pick up the pieces.

To be more proactive, media itself needs to change. It needs to be much more in-depth, analytical and investigative. Journalism schools have traditionally advocated a stand-off role for the media. Don’t get involved, we have often been told, you will not be objective. The doctrine of narrative neutrality has often sterilised us, neutering reporters and turning journalists into stenographers. We have therefore perceived our role as being shovellers of facts, with little leeway for analysis or our own conclusions about a story. Somewhere along the line we have lost our anger, and we have lost our passion to dig. And I will not be revealing a state secret by saying that media itself can be corrupt. In a survey in the United States last year of ten professions with the worst image, media came

second last. Only lawyers were below us in the ranking.

Many of us in media have become cynical about the power of media. Yet, analytical coverage, professional civic journalism and expert coverage does reverse unsustainable policies that have ruined air quality, destroyed our rivers, forests or sterilised our seas. Hard-hitting investigations by an environmental magazine in India have accelerated the implementation of emissions standards. In Nepal, an expose earlier this year of payoffs to a government ministry by operators of polluting diesel three-wheelers to have a ban on them lifted, alerted the prime minister himself to the controversy who then got the ban reinstated in a cabinet meeting the next day.

5. Offer hope

Many journalists think that their watchdog role only requires them to uncover corruption, and it is up to the others to do the mopping up. Right and wrong. Obviously media is not responsible for prosecution and arrest, that is up to the police and the courts. But media can offer solutions, and offer hope.

By highlighting not only the wrong that has been done, but also the possibilities – and the mechanisms – for righting these wrongs, the media help wean citizens away from the cynicism and apathy that corruption engenders.

By featuring interventions that have worked elsewhere, by pointing out where the system is fallible and where it can be strengthened, and by giving prominent play to successful anti-corruption efforts of communities, NGOs and also officials and bureaucrats, journalists help develop a more participatory citizenry and enrich the quality of democracy.

Democracy cannot be sustainable when there is no hope and when citizens believe that change is not possible. It is the media's role to nurture realistic hopes and to bring not only the bad – but also the good – news. Never underestimate the power of a good example.