

Revisiting Watchdog Role Of Journalism For Nation Building: A New**Media Perspective****Dr. Sujeet Kumar****Assistant Professor, Central University of South Bihar**

News is one of the main ingredients of a democracy and news journalism is considered a vital resource of information gathering, processing and, disseminating (Fenton, A, 2010). According to Fenton, A, 2010, “the ethos and vocation of journalism is embedded in a relationship with democracy and its practices.” News can also be defined as something that journalists make it. Journalism can vary from entertainment to sports to celebrity to politics. However, here I focus on news journalism that carries public interest. Nevertheless, it is also very hard to define public interest in the contemporary media age. The factors that are influencing news environment and watchdog role of journalism are economic, legal, political, and technological factors. Therefore, this thesis explores how these factors have changed the watchdog role of journalism and consequences of it on a democratic society (Fenton, A, 2010).

- a. The legal environment that indicates to laws and regulations could influence the news content or the government can use it to restrict the freedom of the media. Political environment refers to the degree of political control over the content of news media and, access to information sources (Odugbemi& Norris, 2008).
- b. Economic environment can influence the media content due to competition that can lead to biased press reports and investigations (Odugbemi& Norris, 2008).
- c. Technological factors, due to technology, there have been a rise in online journalism. Some news sites are professional while others are misleading and vague.

- d. Political factors, for example, power of political parties shown to stop journalists from performing watchdog role for example, threats posed to journalists, kidnapping, and arrests.

Nevertheless, to keep journalists away from these restrictions, there are normative principles laid down by various authors/ journalists. There are quite a few of these normative principles. The definition of journalism is very significant in this argument, as there are different ways of approaching it. One of the definitions of journalism is it is the practice by professional journalists in which they inform the society about the events that the citizens cannot be in touch directly or see otherwise (Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, T, 2007). Journalism is a mode of communication that produces and disseminates information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance. According to Schudson (2003), Journalism is supposed to contribute to the society with a public mission debating on issues related to society, politics, culture, and development. (Schudson, M, 2003) which, also provides an opportunities for the expression of public voices (Phillips, A, et al., Fenton, N. ed., 2010).

According to Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, T, (2007), Journalism is expected to provide independent, reliable, accurate, true, and comprehensive news information that citizen requires. A journalism that is asked to provide something other than that subverts democratic culture. (Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, T, 2007) Example: China, where press lacks freedom and the news is controlled to encourage capitalism. China has intensified efforts over the past year to control what the media can say, a report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) says. (IFJ, January 2010)

Journalism to be successful, whether online journalism, civic journalism, or citizen journalism, it is important to abide the principles that have been continuing since years for enhancement of the watchdog role of journalism. There are four press theories by three American authors, Siebert et al. In addition, there are normative media theory by McQuail and other authors. The two theories taken into consideration are normative model by Kovach & Rosenstiel and social responsibility model by McQuail, which are explained respectively. However, normative model that I have taken into consideration is by Kovach & Rosenstiel is explained below:

“Principles of journalism states that:

1. Journalist’s first obligation is to the truth
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion.
9. Its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience.
10. Citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news.”

. (Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, T, 2007) Nevertheless, it is certainly not possible to believe that every journalist follow normative model(s).

There are other models like, the Social Responsibility Theory, which is very important for conducting the watchdog role of journalism. Siebert et al coined it and McQuail and other authors later added a couple of their own to it. According to this theory, the media have

responsibilities toward society; the media should be available to more groups of people and present opinions other than that of influential politicians(Ibrahimi, 2007).

Journalists are the ones who set agenda, guides citizens to follow what is right, and points out the wrong happening in the society. In short, journalists keeps a watch on the society and on the powerful. Weyrich (1994) argued that there are, “two basis assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.” Media’s main concern should be social responsibility. United States is known as a country where media set an agenda; this happens always, especially, during the elections the newspaper and television are flooded by political debates and presidential news. These issues always are essential and everyone talks about the candidates and their programs. It happens like this since the media leads the public to believe that this is important (Ibrahimi, 2007).

Citizen journalism is an extra ordinary contribution made by the citizens through their first-hand reports, amateur digital photographs, camcorders video footage and snap shots taken at the time of the happening. We can rather call it citizen reporting. This kind of material is used by the media organizations sometimes or is uploaded by bloggers on the internet to seek discussions (Gillmor, 2004). Nevertheless, the material given by the citizen reporters are generally edited by professional to meet accuracy. However, there are facts like, citizen journalists gather such material and post it online with their interpretation on the event. The interpretations are different from citizen to citizen. As a result, the recipient turn to the reliable news sources as several questions are often left unanswered which they further seek it from the mainstream media (television or newspaper) (Gillmor, 2004)

While discussing about the watchdog role of media, it is also important to refer to JurgenHabermas's model of Public Sphere. According to McQuail, "in general public sphere refers to a notional space which provides a more or less autonomous and open arena or forum for public debate. Access to space is free and freedom of assembly, association, and expression are guaranteed." In Habermas's account of the rise of democracy, the first version of public sphere was represented by the eighteenth century coffee house or debating society to keep a check on government by way of an informed and influential public opinion. Habermas also looked at the negative aspect of consequences for democracy in modern times because it is likely for the public to be influenced than help to form opinions (McQuail, D, 2005). James Carey (1999) argues that, "journalism as a practice is unthinkable except in the context of democracy; in fact journalism is usefully understood as another name for democracy."

One of the four models elaborated by Mcquail's that I would like to quote is, the professional model that states roles for society and the guardianship of standards belong in the model to the press itself and to the journalistic profession as they have struggled for freedom and democracy in past times and are still the best guarantors of public interest. Their primary concern is to serve the public's need for information and to provide them with a forum for discussion. The institutional and professional autonomy of journalism is also the best guarantee of an adequate watch being kept in those in power (McQuail, D, 2005). In addition, according to a survey by the Project of Excellence in Journalism, many citizens get their news from a combination of online and offline sources and the internet is now one of the most popular news platform, after television news. While there are limitless possibilities of sources of news online most people say they get their news from professional websites like BBC and New York Times (Journalism.org, 2010).

Other arguments say that the news media forum was that it does not necessarily expand the scope of public discussion. The most significant media forum- the cable talk show, radio programs, and major internet sites- tend to focus on a surprisingly narrower range of blockbuster stories (Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, 2007). Without any reporting infrastructure, chat venues have to rely on the long running, simple stories that audiences can easily indulge in and it has almost nothing to do with journalists' enlightenment (Kovach, B & Rosenstiel, 2007).

The most specific and central question raised is whether the development of new media is enhancing the watchdog role of the journalism. There are reasons for supposing that they are to an extent. According to McQuail, D, (2005), "there is a definite trend towards 'demassification' of old media as the proliferation of channels and platforms for transmission into the mass audience and replaces it with innumerable small and more specialized audience." Although the new media have made the idea of the personalized news, there is accumulating evidence to show that, in the case of news at least, there is still a perceived need for professionalism, reliability and the trust. (McQuail, D, 2005).

"More importantly, new media had contributed to an expectation of more output per individual and a perpetual need to keep ahead of the news pack. Twenty-four hour news channel, the need for the same journalist to report in different formats, and the expectation that journalists should produce additional blogs, all spread the personal resources of reporters more thinly. In effect online news production which is yet to be supported by advertising is further diluting the editorial resources available to news producers in general." (Davis, A, 2010)

A research on the internet states that, “in this new multi-platform media environment, people’s relationship to news is becoming portable, personalized, and participatory. These new metrics stand out:

- **Portable:** 33% of cell phone owners now access news on their cell phones.
- **Personalized:** 28% of internet users have customized their home page to include news from sources and on topics that particularly interest them.
- **Participatory:** 37% of internet users have contributed to the creation of news, commented about it, or disseminated it via postings on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter.” (Journalism.org, 2010)

The components that have changed the consumer behavior are social networking sites and blogs and citizen journalism, which has helped the news become easy access for consumers. News media was previously providing news that was filtered and nothing more could be accessed by ordinary citizen other than what (the news) was provided. Now, people use their social networks and social networking technology to filter, assess, and react to news and keep a check on the news media, which makes the news organizations conscience of their role as watchdog and which as a result, enhances the watchdog role of journalism. The media coverage is more transparent than before.

According to the survey, PEJ and the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, audiences just scan through the headline everyday mainly on two to three website, New York Times, BBC and CNN. Social networking and social forums of discussions is totally different from producing hard core news. Social networking has evolved over the years where people can express themselves through writing and posting videos. On You Tube we can see videos made by performer artists which have millions of hits on them. Web potentially spreads democracy; promote freedom and removes barriers of inequalities. (Journalism. Org, 2010)

But here the argument is whether new media make up for the well trained and funded investigative watchdog journalism.

However, when it comes to the quality of coverage itself, respondents give correspondingly mixed signals. Just under two-thirds (63%) agree with statement “major news organizations do a good job covering all of the important news stories and subjects that matter to me. Yet 72% also back the idea that “most news sources today are biased in their coverage.” Some of the explanation for this dichotomy seems to be rooted in the views of partisans. (Journalism.org, 2010)

Conclusion

Overall, the evidence so far does support the view that the new technology is having a strong effect towards change in the short or even medium term; it is providing a reliable explosion of freedom, which as a result is enhancing the watchdog role of journalism to an extent. On the other hand, most of the online sites have been unsuccessful in proving itself a medium for true and reliable information while the professional websites are walking on the path of success.

References:

Barnett, S. (2009) *Journalism, democracy and public interest: rethinking media pluralism for digital age*. University of oxford [Internet].

Available<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/Publications/Journalism_Democracy_Public_Interest_for_website.pdf>

BBC Trust. *Sustaining citizenship and civil society*. BBC official website [Internet] Available <http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/purpose/public_purposes/citizenship.shtml>

Boaden, H. (2008). *The role of journalism in modern democracy*. BBC news [Internet] Available

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/11/the_role_of_citizen_journalism.html>

Accessed [21 July 2010]

Washington Post (2008), *Crisis in Kenya*. [Internet] Available

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/31/AR2007123101770.html>>

Project for Excellence in Journalism (1998) *Changing definitions of news: A look at the mainstream news over 20 years*. Available <<http://www.journalism.org/node/442>>

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia(2010), Wikipedia, Available

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>>

Hart, H (2010). *Spike Jonez Puts Sci-Fi Spin on Arcade Fire Music*. Underwire [Internet]

Available <<http://www.wired.com/underwire/?intcid=gnav>>

Pew research center's project for excellence in journalism (2010).*How the internet and cell phone users have turned news into social experience*. [Internet] Available

<http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/understanding_participatory_news_consumer>

Pew research center's project for excellence in journalism (2010).*How blogs and social media agenda relate and differ from traditional press*. [Internet] Available

<http://www.journalism.org/analysis_report/new_media_old_media>

Ians (2010).*Time flies, you just need to enjoy playing cricket: Tendulkar*. Merinews [Internet]

Available

<http://www.mynews.in/News/Time_flies,_you_just_need_to_enjoy_playing_cricket_Tendulkar_N77253.html>

Ibrahimi, M. (2007) *The watchdog role of the media-media as the fourth estates*. Rrezja journal [Internet]. Available <<http://rrezja.blogspot.com/2007/01/watchdog-role-of-media.html>>

IMCista (2010); *Israel kills 10+ on Free Gaza Flotilla taking aid to Gaza*, Indymedia UK [Internet] Available at <<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2010/05/452360.html>>

BBC Have your say (2010) *Is spying necessary?* [Internet] Available <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/haveyoursay/2010/07/is_spying_necessary.html>

Joan Dawson (2009); *We Can End Slavery*, OhmyNews [Internet] Available at <http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?article_class=7&no=384863&rel_no=1>

Miniwatts Marketing Group (2008), *Internet world stats: Usage and population statistics* [Internet] Available <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/>>

Niles, R (2010). *What skills do you need to succeed in your journalism career?* The online journalism review [Internet] Available <<http://www.ojr.org/>>

Odugbemi, S & Norris, P (2008) *Do the news media act as watchdogs, agenda-setters and gate keepers?* Harvard workshop [Internet]. Available <<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/WorldBankReport/Chapter%2015%20Odugbemi%20and%20Norris.pdf>>

Voltmer, K (2008); *The media, government accountability and citizen engagement*, Harvard Workshop [Internet] Available <<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/WorldBankReport/Chapter%206%20Voltmer.pdf>>

Guide to the Harvard system of referencing, University of the arts [Internet] Available <http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/llr_harvardstyle.pdf>