

An Investigation into how Journalists experience Political and Economic Pressures on their Ethical Decisions (A Case Study of The Nation Media Group in Kenya and Times Media Group In Kolkata, India)

The main focus of this study was to examine how journalists experience economic and political pressures on their ethical decisions at the Nation Media Group (NMG) conglomerate in Kenya and the Times Media Group in Kolkata, India. Both of these media houses are emerging conglomerates in their respective countries and the researcher sought to find out if political and economic pressures on the decisions of journalists are more intense in these conglomerates than in non- conglomerate media structures. The comparative study in both countries therefore sought to investigate how journalists experience these pressures, how they respond and how their responses compromise their ethical decisions.

The researcher was interested in finding out if the political and economic pressures that journalists experience at the Times Group is any different from those experienced by journalists at the Nation Media Group in Kenya. To achieve the study objectives, the researcher used qualitative semi- structured interviews to examine how journalists at the Nation Media Group and Times Group experience these pressures on their professional ethics as they make their daily decisions. Grounded in the critical political economy of the media tradition, the findings of the study indicate that although journalists in these two media houses are miles apart, they experience almost similar economic and political pressures from advertisers, shareholders' interests and the profit motive all of which largely compromise their ethical decisions.

As Golding & Murdock (1973) observe, the mass media are first and foremost commercial enterprises. This in effect means that although commercial media do play key democratic roles in the society such as surveillance, informing the public, participating in public life as an independent actor by way of critical comment, advice, advocacy and providing a channel and forum for public discussion, the performance of these roles is to a large extent influenced by the inherent economic and political structural constraints that govern the media as a commercial enterprise (McChesney,2004; Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Just like in the Kenyan case the interviewed journalists at Times Group confessed that although most of the times nobody directly comes to interfere with your editorial decisions, as a Times Media journalist, you know what to write and what not to write. From the study findings it can therefore be argued that although the Times Media in India operates in a relatively different political and economic context from the Nation Media Group in Kenya, the fact that both media conglomerates operate under capitalism explains the similarity in political and economic pressures experienced by journalists.

One of the distinct political pressure identified between India and Kenya is that in India, whereas in the Kenyan case tribalism/ ethnicity highly influences journalists decisions especially during key democratic processes such as election, in India this takes the form of Caste prejudice. It emerged from the interviews that the caste affiliation of the individual journalist and particular media matters when it comes to news reporting and the angle taken in the reporting. From the research findings it emerged that the root of the problem of caste prejudice in the media is ownership. When the media is owned by the upper caste, it has to be dominated by the upper caste issues.

In the Kenyan case, journalists and the media in general take explicit political stands that always have an ethnic leaning because politics in Kenya are deeply entrenched in ethnicity. Journalists therefore end up 'protecting their person' - a politician from their community and this skews their accuracy in reporting. It also emerged that in both cases there is 'buying out' of journalists by politicians though it seems the practice is more rampant in India than it is in Kenya. The study findings show that corruption in Indian newsrooms has gone way beyond the corruption of individual journalists and specific media organizations to 'paid for news' where newspapers and television channels receive funds for publishing or broadcasting information in favour of particular individuals, corporate entities, representatives of political parties and candidates contesting elections. This in effect undermines the role of such media in the promotion of democracy.

At the Nation Media in Kenya, this mainly takes the form of 'advertorial news' where corporate organizations through their PR departments send press releases which are broadcast as 'normal news'. In most cases those corporate organizations that have financial affiliation with the Nation Media such as banks will also 'sponsor news' and in this way they will have a leeway to promote

their business interests to the public. Pressure from advertisers was also singled out as one of the most pressing threat to journalists' freedom and responsibility in both countries. Journalists from both media houses observed that advertisers know that as commercial media, they cannot do without advertising revenue and therefore they hold the media at ransom with either threatening to withdraw advertising revenue or actually withdrawing that revenue if the media publish a story that paints the advertiser in a negative light.

Overall, the findings from both countries were very informative and they seemed to agree with the main hypothesis of the study; that the performance of private media in a democratic society is largely influenced by the inherent political and economic structural constraints.

References

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