

Professionalism in Journalism and Indicators to Assess It

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Professionalism

Journalists are professional communicators. As professional communicators, they are believed to have some sort of professional standard. Just as in case of other professionals, it is natural that journalists, too, have some professional standards to which must abide by as they carry out their duties. It is expected that journalists understand the principles of journalism and essentials of the profession, and put them into practice discharging their duties. In other words, to abide by the principles of journalism is considered as the practice of professional standard in journalism.

McQuail (2005, p. 289) mentions the following as general criteria of professionalism:

- Control of entry to the occupation
- Core skills for which training is required
- Codes of ethics and standards of practice that are enforced
- Having a significant social role to play
- Having autonomy in the exercise of skills

It is beyond the scope of this study whether journalism fulfills all the above mentioned criteria in ideal sense. However, it is a fact that discoursing professionalism with regard to the field of journalism is not something unusual. Rather; professionalism has become "a notion so commonly accepted that it seems impossible to criticize" (Nerone, 2004, p. 192). Though it is argued that it is "a kind of elitism" (ibid.) the notion of professionalism has already earned a broad base of acceptance in journalism. It is generally believed that "If reporters and news editors are not professionally responsible, the contents they produce and edit becomes questionable and less than credible" (Kharel, 2010, p. 64), whereas the significance of journalists in the society comes from their credibility.

The development of professionalism in journalism involves, including other things, "the drawing up of principles of good practice in the form of codes of practice and ethics" (McQuail, 2005, p. 173). The content of such codes "provides a good idea of what it was felt that journalism *ought* to be doing. At least they reveal the values that the media publicly proclaim as guidelines for their work" (pp. 173-174). Codes "represent a particular media industry's best expression of its shared wisdom" (Baran, 2004, p. 487).

"All journalists share the same basic values and journalistic principles" (Dominick, 2005, p. 330). There is "quite high level of agreement on certain general principles" (McQuail, 2005, p. 174). This is why journalistic codes, such as Nepal's Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012), refer to the *basic norms and principles* of journalism while describing professionalism: "Faithfully exercise professionalism of a high order so as to be responsible, accountable and reliable, and dedicated to the basic norms and principles of journalism."

There seems consensus on what journalists write should qualify to be seen as impartial, balanced and objective. Such consensus is reflected in the provisions of various journalistic codes of conduct across the world. According to McQuail (2005),

it does look as if there is quite a lot of common ground in what journalists in different countries formally accept as the appropriate standards. In that sense there is something like a shared body of normative theory to apply to daily practice. ... The predominant emphasis nearly everywhere is on the standards of objective (neutral), independent and informative (factually correct) journalism. (p. 175)

The ethical standards of media in South Asian context is observed "in compliance with Western standards" (Kshetri, 2009, p. 38), and "common ground for ethical practices in the South Asian countries" (p. 45) can be explored. This also highlights the broad base of professional ideals in journalism.

McQuail (2005, p. 174) enlists the following as most frequently found principles in journalistic codes:

- Truthfulness of information
- Clarity of information
- Defence of the public's rights
- Responsibilities in forming public opinion
- Standards of gathering and presenting information
- Respecting the integrity of the sources

In case of Nepal, "Generally, editorial values and the integrity of the Nepali media have been rooted in the foundations of professionalism such as 'responsibility', accuracy, truth, honesty, impartiality, fairness and 'good taste' – and these values are upheld by the Code of Journalistic Ethics" (UNESCO, 2013b, p. 56). Kharel (2010, p. 25) mentions accuracy, balance, credibility, impartiality, proximity, inclusiveness and participation, among other qualities, as "the cardinal principles" that journalists are expected to abide by. According to Kharel (2012), professional responsibility entails fairness doctrine (balance), right to reply (access), uniformity and consistency (credibility), and persistence (follow-up) (pp. 141-142). In another place, he writes: "Accountability (gatekeeping, agenda setting), plurality (multiple channels and multiple voices), transparency (business dealings,

circulation/audience size, in-house code of ethics) and credibility (accuracy, balance, impartiality, fairness and interesting quality) are the four pillars that raise the foundation of professional journalism" (Kharel, 2012, pp. 282-283).

The codes of ethics have been put in place by media professionals in order to delineate how practitioners should go about their work. The theme is: follow the rules and your decision will be correct one. Though ethics is not so easy, just to follow a certain code and be sure that all the moral choices have been done rightly (Vivian, 1999, p. 491), such rules certainly create a deontological foundation for common standard of professional journalism.

Thus, professionalism is something that is highly valued and considered crucial in journalism. The concept draws on some shared ideals, and is judged in light of some constructs widely accepted by journalist fraternity. Moreover, these ideals and prescriptive rules in accordance with them are institutionalized through journalistic codes across the world. The common ground outlined by such codes provide basis for studying behavioral dimension of professionalism in the field.

In this context, outlining some indicators that represent core professional principles and practice seems relevant. In fact, various journalistic codes across world consist of some core indicators that provide a touchstone for the assessment of professional standard of journalists under study. The indicators that have been distinguished for the purpose of this research are discussed below.

Indicators

Assessing professional standard of journalists is a complex task. On the one hand, it is argued that "professionalism is a degree of accomplishment which cannot be measured by tests or examinations and can only be recognized by fellow professionals" (McQuail, 2005, p. 288). On the other hand, scholars are still contesting whether journalism meets the criteria to be considered as a complete profession (p. 289). However, the sharing of basic

values and journalistic principles shared by journalists certainly outlines some sort of professional standard in the field of journalism. By virtue of this fact, the present study employs some indicators for the assessment of professional standard of journalists that serve as a checklist for monitoring of media content.

Drawing on UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism, Code of Journalistic Ethics 2003 (Amended and Revised 2008), ASNE's Statement of Principles, and IFJ's Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists; and also taking insights from UNESCO's *Media Development Indicators* and *Journalists' Safety Indicators: National Level*, as many as 12 indicators have been distinguished for the purpose of this research.

The indicators are grouped into two sets:

- (I) Indicators for the assessment of particular news stories (that is, news stories as unit of analysis)

The first set consists of following four indicators:

1. Accuracy
2. Balance
3. Fair Play
4. Objectivity

- (II) Indicators for the assessment of particular newspapers (that is, newspapers as unit of analysis)

The second set consists of following eight indicators:

5. Copyright and Citation
6. Impartiality
7. Independence
8. Public Access, Participation and Answerability
9. Readiness to Rectify Errors
10. Responsibility
11. Separation of News and Advertisement
12. Style

Indicators for the Assessment of Particular News Stories

In this category, as many as eight indicators are delineated as following:

Accuracy

The principle of accuracy envisions journalistic reporting necessarily based on facts. This is how news story would be different from a work of fiction. As Neal and Brown (2000, p. 21) observe, "News stories and works of fiction differ, of course. News consists only of actual persons and events, with nothing invented, whereas fiction consists of imagined characters and scenes." The essence of this principle is: facts should be accurately reported. "Checking facts takes time, but it is something that a professional reporter must do for every story" (Dominick, 2005, p. 331).

McQuail (2005) observes that accuracy can mean several things, since it cannot be directly 'read' or 'measured' from inspection of texts alone. One meaning of accuracy is conformity to independent records of events, whether in documents, other media or eyewitness accounts. Another meaning is more subjective: accuracy is conformity of reports to the perception of the source of the news or the subject of the news (object of reporting). Accuracy may also be a matter of internal consistency within news texts. (p. 356)

Accuracy consists of refraining from errors or mistakes. According to Ryan and O'Donnell (qtd. in Adhikary, 2008, p. 255) a news copy may consist of following three types of mistakes:

1. The killer mistakes
2. The embarrassing mistakes
3. The tedious mistakes

The killer mistakes include:

- A flawed lead
- A flawed headline
- A misspelled name

- A libelous statement
- A wrong location
- A problem in quotation
- A mistake introduce

The embarrassing mistakes include:

- A spelling error of a word other than a name
- A grammatical mistake
- A punctuation mistake

The tedious mistakes include:

- A style mistake
- A usage mistake
- A lack of tightening

A news story free from all types of error would be credible, whereas erroneous stuffs would certainly jeopardize the credibility of the news outlet and journalists concerned.

Accuracy is closely related with truth. ASNE's Statement of Principles states:

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.

Thus, abiding by the principle of accuracy involves making news story fact-based, free from errors, free from bias and distortion, and providing context. The news story should cite specific sources because attribution to credible sources ensures credibility of the news story. KC (2007) has presented various instances of errors in news stories. Including other factors, he emphasizes on how the "source" is crucial to keep news stories free from errors; and the need for basis of information, analysis

and interpretation to be clearly set out. As the Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012) states: "Journalists media should impart true, factual, balanced information that is faithfully objective, citing sources and also setting out the basis for such information."

Balance

The principle of balance in journalism envisions presenting all sides (of sources, opinions, facts pertinent to the issue) fairly. "Every story has two or more sides. All journalists must make sure that they do not publicize or promote just one of them. Information should be offered on all sides of a story". (Dominick, 2005, p. 331) As such, balance involves the issue of inclusion and exclusion in news story, and hence closely relate with framing and priming. As gatekeepers, framing and priming are part and parcel of journalists' professional life (Adhikary, 2009, p. 144).

In fact, "the question of how news information is presented or 'framed'" (McQuail, 2005, p. 378) is a crucial issue. According to McQuail,

Framing is a way of giving some overall interpretation to isolated items of fact. It is almost unavoidable for journalists to do this and in so doing to depart from pure 'objectivity' and to introduce some (unintended bias). When information is supplied to news media by sources (as much often is), then it arrives with a built-in frame that suits the purpose of the source and is unlikely to be purely objective. (p. 379)

Presenting each and every side may not be possible due to various reasons. This is why journalists have freedom of framing and priming. But, the freedom of framing and priming should not be misused as a disguise for bias. In other words, though framing and priming is essential while reporting, any event or situation should not be included or excluded due to bias.

The concept of balance should be understood with relation to other principles such as objectivity, impartiality and independence, including others. Meanwhile, an operational definition for

distinguishing these closely related concepts is required for a particular context. Balance also signifies the journalists' commitment to truth and accuracy.

Fair Play

The concept of fair play is broader enough to attract various issues to be dealt by professional journalists. As ASNE's Statement of Principles states:

Journalists should respect the rights of the people involved in the news, observe common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for fairness and accuracy of their news reports. Persons publicly accused should be given the earliest opportunity to respond. Pledges of confidentiality to news sources must be honored at all costs, and therefore should not be given away lightly. Unless there is clear and pressing need to maintain confidences, sources of information should be identified.

UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism clearly values the respect for privacy and human dignity: "An integral part of the professional standards of the journalist is respect for the right of the individual to privacy and human dignity, in conformity with provisions of international and national law concerning protection of the rights and the reputation of others, prohibiting libel, calumny, slander and defamation."

The Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012) also has various provisions in this regard. Various articles of the code instruct for respect for right to privacy, decent behavior, respect for human dignity, not to penalize the victim, and not to mention the name of a person not related to the event.

Fair play envisions that the news story reflects respect to the right of the people involved/mentioned in the news. This involves respect for right to privacy, respect for human dignity, not to penalize the victims, not to mention the name of a person not related to the event, and keeping the news story free from malicious misrepresentation, slander, libel, unfounded accusations etc. In addition, ensuring that the language used is moral, courteous and

decent, and also ensuring common standard of decency in the news are also crucial in this regard. Moreover, pledges of confidentiality should not be violated, and there should be no use of unidentified source when there is no clear and pressing need for such practice.

Objectivity

As a professional standard, objectivity has a wide currency in the field of journalism. Even it has been viewed "as the ruling ideology in professional journalism" (Lee and Jeffres, 2009, p. 6). McQuail (2005) sees objectivity as probably the "most central concept in media theory relating to information quality ... especially as applied to news information" (p. 200). However, it is not easy to define it. As McQuail (2005) observes, its meaning varies across the countries (p. 287). He views objectivity as "a relatively complex notion when one goes beyond the simple idea that news should reliably (and therefore honestly) report what is really going on in the world" (p. 355).

The notion of objectivity has been also viewed as "an expectation that's almost impossible to be fulfilled in this world of complex realities" (Lee and Jeffres, 2009, p. 6). However, scholars have attempted to define it in the context of journalism. According to Dominick (2005),

Objectivity means that the reporter tries to transmit the news untainted by conscious bias and without personal comment or coloration. Of course, complete and total objectivity is not possible because the process of reporting itself requires countless judgments, each influenced in some way by the reporter's value system. Nonetheless, journalists have traditionally respected the truth, refused to distort facts deliberately, and consciously detached themselves as much as possible from what they were reporting. (p. 331)

Clearly, the notion of objectivity is related to journalistic practice. According to McQuail (2005),

Objectivity is a particular form of media *practice* and also a particular attitude to the task of information collection, processing

and dissemination. The main features include adopting a position of detachment and neutrality towards the object of reporting. This means an absence of subjectivity or personal involvement. Secondly there is a lack of partisanship—not taking sides in matters of dispute or showing bias. Thirdly objectivity requires strict attachment to accuracy and other truth criteria (such as relevance and completeness). It also presumes a lack of ulterior motive or service to a third party. The process of observing and reporting should, thus, not be contaminated by subjectivity, nor should it interfere with the reality being reported on. (p. 200)

DeFleur and Dennis (1991, p. 160) mention objectivity as “a style of reporting” that “attempts to be impersonal and factual; it is based on the idea that fact and opinion can be separated.” They further discuss two differing views on it:

Defenders of this style say that by removing emotions and personal involvement from their stories, they ensure fairness and a balancing of interests. Critics claim that the objective form is not objective – that is, unbiased – at all. No matter how impersonal the tone of a story, the selection and ordering of what is to be said is subjective. (ibid.)

There are scholars who doubt whether pure objectivity is attainable in practice. For Hohenberg (1971), objectivity in journalism pertains to honesty:

What editors mean by objectivity, if I may dare to read the editorial mind, is nothing more or less than plain honesty in the news. That is attainable, as any issue a good newspaper will demonstrate. But the degree of detachment and lack of comment implied by the use of the word objectivity in its traditional sense is beyond humankind. (p. 3)

The pledge to objectivity is perhaps the foundation stone of credibility. According to Lee and Jeffres (2009), Equating news to truth value has been the media’s convenient shield against credibility issues, but in reality journalism has been a subjective endeavor all along in many of its essential tenets. Its practice

always involved selection of important items, judgment over newsworthiness, human processing of information, assessment of news values, and consideration of fairness, impartiality and balance. In all these facets, the so-called objective reporting has rather been relevant to how-to-report techniques than to what-to-report substance. (p. 6)

They argue that subjectivity can be objectified by means of "the journalism's professional routines and techniques – i.e., checking accuracy, how to quote, whom to attribute to, verifying records, etc." (p. 7). It is emphasized that "objectivity requires a fair and non-discriminatory attitude to sources and to objects of news reporting, all of which should be treated on equal terms. Additionally, different points of views on matters where the facts are in dispute should be treated as of equal standing and relevance". (McQuail, 2005, p. 201)

One significant issue with regard to objectivity is editorialization. Regmi (2008) views editorialization as poisonous to news stories. Refraining from editorialization is a must for ensuring objectivity.

Harcup (2004) suggests some guidelines for ensuring objective reporting:

- Balance and even-handedness in presenting different sides of an issue
- Accuracy and realism in reporting
- Presenting all main relevant points
- Separating facts from opinion, but treating opinion as relevant
- Minimizing the influence of the writer's own attitude, opinion or involvement
- Avoiding slant, rancor or devious purposes.

Drawing on Westerstahl (1983), McQuail (2005) discusses, objectivity has to deal with *values* as well as with facts and that facts also have evaluative implications.

In this scheme 'factuality' refers, first of all, to a form of reporting which deals in events and statements which can be checked against sources and are presented free from comment, or at least clearly separated from any comment. (p. 201)

Further, "completeness of an account, accuracy, and an intention not to mislead or suppress what is relevant (good faith)" (pp. 201-202) are also emphasized in this regard. Sensationalism is observed as "forms of presentation which depart from the objectivity ideal" (p. 357).

UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism also emphasizes on the journalists' dedication to objective reality:

The foremost task of the journalist is to serve the people's right to true and authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality whereby facts are reported conscientiously in their proper context, pointing out their essential connections and without causing distortions, with due deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist, so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate the formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature and essence of events, processes and states of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.

In fact, all the journalistic codes put such emphasis to objectivity.

Indicators for the Assessment of Particular Newspapers

In this category, as many as eight indicators are delineated as following:

Copyright and Citation

Copyright involves "identifying and granting ownership of a given piece of expression" (Baran, 2004, p. 473), and it "is designed to protect the creator's financial interest in that expression" (ibid.). As UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism states "it belongs to professional ethics to respect

intellectual property and, in particular, to refrain from plagiarism." According to IFJ's Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists, plagiarism is one of "grave professional offences."

Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012) also has emphasized on copyright and citation as following: "With regard to news or publishing-broadcast material that has already been used by any other news agency or media, one shall not publish, broadcast or distribute the same again without citing the original source. While citing the original source the permission of the original source is generally required".

Abiding by the principle of copyright and citation is related to honesty of the journalists and media concerned. It is also positively related with credibility. In other words, refraining from plagiarism and violation of copyright and proper citation of original source are also crucial for gaining credibility among the public.

Impartiality

Drawing on Westerstahl (1983), McQuail (2005) writes, "impartiality presupposes a 'neutral attitude' and has to be achieved through a combination of balance (equal or proportional time/space/emphasis) as between opposing interpretations, points of view or versions of events, and neutrality in presentation" (p. 202). As Kharel (2010) rightly notes, "Credibility is the soul of professional media for earning public trust. Partisanism in collecting and disseminating political information is, therefore, anathema to those committed to this principle" (p. 57).

According to McQuail (2005), The issue of what counts as *impartiality* in news seems relatively simple but can also be complex in practice, not least because there is little chance of achieving a value-free assessment of value freedom. Impartiality is appreciated mainly because many events involve conflict and are open to alternative interpretations and evaluations (this is most obviously true of political news, but much the same could be said of sports). Most generally, the normal standard of impartiality calls for balance in the choice and use of sources, so as to reflect

different points of view, and also the presentation of two (or more) sides where judgements or facts are contested. (p. 357)

Impartiality requires "neutrality in the presentation of news: separating facts from opinion, avoiding value judgements or emotive language or pictures" (ibid.).

Impartiality should not be viewed in the political milieu only. In fact, there are various factors due to which journalists may lose impartiality, and become partisan. Partiality, as Kharel (2010) rightly observes, is not limited to political domain only:

Partisan press here does not only mean affiliation with political groupings. Prejudices related with religion, race, caste, belief, kith and kin networks, or even pure personal taste could spell disaster for the free press, particularly if journalists make unwarranted efforts to establish those prejudices in the public mind by unfairly using the news media as a tool. (p. 68)

The principle of impartiality does not bar a journalist from expressing a professional journalistic assessment or judgment based on facts. However, a personal opinion established as a consequence of bias is not acceptable. There should not be any partiality, favor, bias in news stories and editorials. Meanwhile, if a journalist refrains from watchdog function or leaves critical views in the name of being impartial, it would be violation of professional standard. As ASNE's Statement of Principles clarifies: "To be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression. Sound practice, however, demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified."

Impartiality cannot be seen in isolation. Rather; other values, such independence and objectivity are also closely related with it. Hence, assessment of impartiality also requires broad understanding of professionalism.

Independence

Journalists are expected to be independent in their professional practice. Independence becomes crucial issue when there is conflict of interests, and it "is a necessary condition of detachment and truthfulness" (McQuail, 2005, p. 201). The importance of independence can be gauged from the fact that without independence other professional norms, such as objectivity and impartiality, are also impossible to abide by. "Perhaps the foremost expectation about media content is that it should reflect or embody the spirit of free expression, despite the many institutional and organizational pressures". (McQuail, 2005, p. 354)

The right to information and free press can thrive only when media are independent. In other words, protection and promotion of press freedom and safeguarding and enforcing the right to information, which are the major ideals that the Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012) and many other codes envision, cannot be materialized without independent media. And, "an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government" as envisioned in ASNE's Statement of Principles is also not possible without independent media.

According to Kharel (2012), Independent media see what their partisan counterparts do not – the rot cancerously creeping into the organisational fabric and governance mechanism. Uniformity, continuity, consistency and, above all, professional integrity and credibility nurtured by impartiality and accuracy are the answers for the Fourth Estate. Otherwise, corruption and bad governance get encouraged when the vitally important services are treated as propaganda tools serving a few at the cost of many – that too, by feeding false, exaggerated and biased contents. (p. 76)

He writes in a different place:

An independent media sector is one in which the media are genuinely independent from interference by the owners, State authority or powerful interest groups that might prejudice news gathering and presentation process. Independence includes

elimination of partisan interests' censorship of news, directly or through agents. (Kharel, 2012, p. 135)

Freedom from commercial, political or social pressure is a must for media to be independent. As DeFleur and Dennis (1991) say, "Political as well as economic considerations place limitations on the media" (p. 111). In fact, "The relationship between media and politics is by no means straightforward" (Jones and Jones, 1999, p. 193). The situation becomes even complex when the government bodies are the main advertiser, just like in case of Nepal where such is the case especially to local media.

Just like in case of political dependence or partisanship, dependence on advertising also invites difficulties with regard to independence. As it has been observed, "advertising support for newspapers has both costs and benefits. Dependence on it may bias publishers in favor of the values and interests of merchants and businesses". (DeFleur and Dennis, 1991, p. 96)

McManus claims that "journalism and market norms conflict more than converge" (2004, p. 273). It is to note:

Dependence on advertising discourages newspapers from dealing harshly with the business community that supports them. Publishers who lose the good will of the business community risk losing advertising money as well. Thus, under today's arrangements, newspapers that print stories damaging to local business ... are truly biting the hand that feeds them. (DeFleur and Dennis, 1991, p. 96)

Besides political and economic aspects, independence of media should be evaluated with regard to other stakeholders also. For instance, "Lobbyists and special interest groups attempt to influence the media for their own purpose". (DeFleur and Dennis, 1991, p. 135) In case of Nepal, NGOs are very powerful section of the society. Another aspect to be noted is: the country has been witnessing new forms of "identity politics" based on regional, ethnic, language and cultural differences. Nepal remains vulnerable to clashes perpetuated by political ideology as well as by the "identity politics" based on ethnic, caste, language, regionalism

and narrower sectarian religious lines (Adhikary, 2010). Such phenomena certainly affect journalism sector too. However, it is yet to assess how such phenomena have affected media in Nepal especially with regard to their independence.

In order to assess whether journalists are abiding by the principle of independence it is pertinent to see whether affiliation/bias to some political party, ideology, ethnicity, regionalism etc. is evident in news stories, editorials and other pieces. Such study certainly requires drawing on insights against other indicators too. Even the study needs to go beyond content analysis and take insights from context analysis as well.

Public Access, Participation and Answerability

Whereas the traditional notion of mass communication was characterized by one-way flow of information, democratic ideal of informed citizenry demands vibrant two-way communication and participation. In fact, "the opportunity to express oneself and to hear others express themselves – is as essential to the attainment of the social values underlying free speech as to the individual" (Lichtenberg, 2004, p. 179). And, "the public interest and the media interest are congruent only when there is a viable relationship between issuer and consumer of communication that is operating to the satisfaction of both" (Dennis, 2004, p. 167).

According to UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism, "The nature of the profession demands that the journalist promote access by the public to information and participation of the public in the media, including the right of correction or rectification and the right of reply." In other words, journalistic professionalism not only adhere to journalists' right to collect and disseminate information, but also citizens' right to participate and to be heard in media. Hence, "democratic media ... should let the people talk to each other rather than just listen to experts" (Nerone, 2004, p. 192).

Kharel (2012, p. 67) rightly asserts that citizens "have the right to be heard in especially the public, professional media and responsible media." In another place, he raises basic questions in this regard:

Without their regular participation in debate of public concern, citizens cannot contribute much to governance. The sanctity of representative government does not mean completely depending upon the elected members to define, interpret and implement governance without public participation and discussion. Consultation with the public should be mandatory. Here, mass media contents can become the daily diet of citizens. But is such diet nutritious and balanced for an informed society in making informed decisions? Are the media independent and fair? (Kharel, 2012, p. 86)

For participation, access is primary because participation comes into effect only after access. "Both in news contents and views, space/airtime access is a form of participation; so are diversity, geographic reach, topic diversity, source diversity and coverage diversity" (Kharel, 2012, p. 133). Thus, from teleological approach, the principle of participation has wide range of impact. Essentially, it addresses the issue of inclusion, increases sense of ownership, and promotes vibrant communication among the people.

Operationally, access and participation can be actualized in various ways. The provision of the "Letter to the Editor" or similar column is a minimum operational ground in this regard. Kharel (2010) observes, this "column represents audience generated feedback in newspaper and magazine. The column is believed to be the oldest form of feedback mechanism in the news media". (p. 162) Such letters, as Lee and Jeffres (2009) rightly note, "are subject to editors' selection and editing. They are by and large a feedback route from the public, not a proactive input measures. All these measures are better than nothing, at most, but they fall short of making the public a substantive partner to editorial or programming decisions". (p. 3)

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Answerability demands more than access and participation. This involves the sense of accountability among the journalists. For instance, having the "Letter to the Editor" or similar column is not sufficient for answerability; rather, it becomes important whether that column include readers' feedback/comment/criticism on materials published in the newspaper itself and whether the newspaper publishes explanation or denial (*spashtikaran* or *khandan*) of those who were accused in the newspaper, and whether the newspaper also publishes response to such feedback/comment/criticism (such as expression of regret, assurance to rectify, etc.). Answerability is crucial to make the journalists accountable thereby enhancing their credibility.

Readiness to Rectify Errors

Readiness to rectify errors involves an allegiance to truth. This gives journalists a second chance to uphold accuracy. As ASNE's Statement of Principles states, "Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently." According to Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012), the readiness to rectify errors consists of the following: "Upon receiving information of any error or mistake in a publication or broadcast, to rectify such error or mistakes as soon as possible, and give proper place to any refutation or response that comes accompanied by evidence, publishing-broadcasting the same in clear language."

Corrigendum and apology by journalists shows their courage to admit own limitation and errors caused by it. It also signifies journalists' honesty. It is viewed as sincere attempt to rectify errors and provide factual information. It is one of the crucial norms of professional journalism.

Responsibility

According to UNESCO's International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism, Information in journalism is understood as social good and not as a commodity, which means that journalist shares responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus

accountable not only to those controlling the media but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist's social responsibility requires that he or she will act under all circumstances in conformity with a personal ethical consciousness.

It also emphasizes on respect for privacy and human dignity, respect for public interest, elimination of war and other great evils confronting humanity, and so on.

According to ASNE's Statement of Principles, The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time. ... press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all level of government.

According to IFJ's Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists, "The journalist shall be aware of the danger of discrimination being furthered by media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national or social origins."

The Code of Journalistic Ethics (Press Council Nepal, 2012) also emphasizes on social responsibility, respect for humanitarianism, human rights and international relations, not undermine national integrity, not adversely affect social justice or good-will, no discrimination, not encourage violence, terrorism and crime, not publish or broadcast scenes of nudity or pictures in a manner that spreads hatred, fear and provocation, and so on.

The above instances are enough to show the extent to which responsibility is valued in journalism profession. Assessing whether journalists are abiding by this principle requires a holistic approach of their professional performance.

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Separation of News and Advertisement

News media are inherent of competition and conflict of interest between newsroom and advertising department. "The media industries ... exist not only to entertain and inform their audiences but also to make a profit for their owners and shareholders". (Baran, 2004, pp. 484-485) What DeFleur and Dennis (1991) observe in case of newspapers is equally applicable in other forms of commercial news outlet too:

Newspapers have a dual identity. On the one hand, they are quasi-public institutions that claim to serve the public interest; on the other hand, they are profit-making businesses that can be very self-serving. As a quasi-public institution, the newspaper is supposed to be the watchdog of the public interest and often an antagonist of government and other forces in power. As a business, the newspaper seeks to make a profit and is a member of the business community, a major employer, a member of the chamber of commerce. The conflict inherent in this dual role can show up within the newspaper organization, as business interests and the professional values of journalism clash. For example, the advertising department and news editors may compete for space, or they may argue over how some stories should be covered. (p. 135)

As the principal source of revenue, advertising is essential for media. "When newspapers prosper financially, it is because advertisers recognize their worth as an ad medium" (Baran, 2004, p. 115). Meanwhile, maintaining a healthy relation between news-hole and ad space may be a daunting task. Though both news and advertisement are information they are different in nature. Ad must be separated from news. However, often it is very hard to make such distinction as a reader. For instance,

In the case of soft news – features of various kinds – an insidious commercialization is present, for soft news stories almost always contain, as an end result, the promotion of some product or service. We learn about "undiscovered" restaurants, interesting films, and the best boutiques in which to buy this or that kind of clothing. Ultimately, although these features may seem quite

innocent, they serve as free advertisements for businesses. From a sociological perspective, the manifest functions of such features are to entertain and to provide useful information; the latent function is to "sell" restaurants, movies, and all manner of other things. (Berger, 2005, p. 182)

Separation of news and advertisement is essential to ensure basic norms of journalism such as objectivity, impartiality, independence, and others. Thus, these are crucial issues whether the news media present advertisement as news, whether there is clear distinction between promotional stuff and news stories, and whether there is advertisers' influence in news stories/editorials.

Style

Of the 12 indicators delineated for the purpose of this study, previous indicators are found explicitly mentioned in journalistic codes, whereas style is not found having mentioned in such explicit manner. However, style plays no fewer roles in day-to-day practice of journalism. It involves standardization, and provides mechanism for cross-checking, examination and compliance to above discussed professional norms including accuracy. It is in this sense professional journalism includes style as its part and parcel.

Checklist

Drawing on UNESCO International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism, Code of Journalistic Ethics 2003 (Amended and Revised 2008), ASNE's Statement of Principles, and IFJ's Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists; and also taking insights from UNESCO's Media Development Indicators and Journalists' Safety Indicators: National Level, as many as 12 indicators have been distinguished for the purpose of this research.

(To abide by the principles of journalism = The practice of professional standard in journalism)

The indicators are grouped into two sets:

- (III) Indicators for the assessment of particular news stories (that is, news stories as unit of analysis)

The first set consists of following four indicators:

13. Accuracy
14. Balance
15. Fair Play
16. Objectivity

(IV) Indicators for the assessment of particular newspapers (that is, newspapers as unit of analysis)

The second set consists of following eight indicators:

17. Copyright and Citation
18. Impartiality
19. Independence
20. Public Access, Participation and Answerability
21. Readiness to Rectify Errors
22. Responsibility
23. Separation of News and Advertisement
24. Style

How to Use the Checklist?

- I. Indicators for the assessment of particular news stories (that is, news stories as unit of analysis)

The indicators in this set are aimed to serve as checklist in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Here, each news story under study has to be read carefully and intensively against key questions outlined below and labeled according to the categories as distinguished below.

Accuracy

- Is the news story fact-based, free from bias and distortion, and in context?
- Does the news story cite specific sources?

- Is the basis for information, analysis and interpretation clearly set out?
- Is the news story free from errors?

Quantitative aspect: Read each news story carefully and intensively in the light of these questions and then make entry under either of these two categories: "Abiding by the principle of accuracy" or "Not abiding by the principle of accuracy." Finally, percentage of news stories in each category has to be calculated.

Qualitative aspect: In case of news stories "Not abiding by the principle of accuracy," try to figure out some trend. Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Balance

- Does the news story present all sides (of sources, opinions, facts pertinent to the issue) fairly?
- Is framing and priming impartial? (oversight Vs. bias)

Quantitative aspect: Read each news story carefully and intensively in the light of these questions and then make entry under either of these two categories: "Abiding by the principle of balance" or "Not abiding by the principle of balance." Finally, percentage of news stories in each category has to be calculated.

Qualitative aspect: In case of news stories "Not abiding by the principle of balance," try to figure out some trend. Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Fair Play

- Does the news story reflect respect to the right of the people involved/mentioned in the news? (for e.g. Right to Privacy, Respect for human dignity, Not to penalize the victims, Not to mention the name of a person not related to the event)
- Is the news story free from malicious misrepresentation, slander, libel, unfounded accusations etc.?
- Is the language used moral, courteous and decent? (Is common standard of decency ensured in the news?)

- Are pledges of confidentiality seemed being violated? Or, Is there use of unidentified source even though there is no clear and pressing need for such practice?

Quantitative aspect: Read each news story carefully and intensively in the light of these questions and then make entry under either of these two categories: "Abiding by the principle of fair play" or "Not abiding by the principle of fair play." Finally, percentage of news stories in each category has to be calculated.

Qualitative aspect: In case of news stories "Not abiding by the principle of fair play," try to figure out some trend. Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Objectivity

- Is the news story free from editorialization?
- Does the news story present objective picture of reality?

Quantitative aspect: Read each news story carefully and intensively in the light of these questions and then make entry under either of these two categories: "Abiding by the principle of objectivity" or "Not abiding by the principle of objectivity." Finally, percentage of news stories in each category has to be calculated.

Qualitative aspect: In case of news stories "Not abiding by the principle of objectivity," try to figure out some trend. Note the worst stuffs in this category!

II. Indicators for the assessment of particular newspapers (that is, newspapers as unit of analysis)

Generally for Qualitative Data

Here, each newspaper in the sample has to be assessed against key questions outlined below.

Copyright and Citation

- Does the newspaper publish news or other pieces without citing the original source?

What kind of materials do newspapers publish without citing the original source? Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Impartiality

- Are articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation clearly identified?
- Is there clear distinction between news reports and opinion?
- Is there any evident partiality, favor, bias in news stories and editorials or not?

Some representative cases of violation of the principle of impartiality. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Independence

- Is affiliation/bias to some political party, ideology, ethnicity, regionalism etc. evident in news stories, editorials and other pieces?

Some representative cases of violation of the principle of independence. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Public Access, Participation and Answerability

- Is there "Letter to the Editor" or similar column? Does that column include readers' feedback/comment/criticism on materials published in the newspaper itself? Does the newspaper publish explanation or denial (*spashtikaran* or *khandan*) of those who were accused in the newspaper? Does the newspaper publish response to such feedback/comment/criticism (such as expression of regret, assurance to rectify, etc.)?

Some representative cases. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Readiness to Rectify Errors

- Does the newspaper publish corrigendum and apology? How often?

Some representative cases. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Responsibility

The assessment should be done in the light of professional ideals.

- *Example from Code of Journalistic Ethics 2003 (Amended and Revised 2008):* Social responsibility, Respect for humanitarianism, human rights and international relations, Not undermine national integrity, Not adversely affect social justice or good-will, No discrimination, Not encourage violence, terrorism and crime, Not publish or broadcast scenes of nudity or pictures in a manner that spreads hatred, fear and provocation, and so on.
- *From UNESCO International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism:* "Information in journalism is understood as social good and not as a commodity, which means that journalist shares responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus accountable not only to those controlling the media but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist's social responsibility requires that he or she will act under all circumstances in conformity with a personal ethical consciousness." Also consider: Respect for privacy and human dignity, Respect for public interest, Elimination of war and other great evils confronting humanity, and so on.
- *From ASNE's Statement of Principles:* "The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time. ... press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent

scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all level of government."

- *IFJ's Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists*: "The journalist shall be aware of the danger of discrimination being furthered by media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national or social origins."

NOTE THE EXEMPLARY AND WORST CASES!

Separation of News and Advertisement

- Does the newspaper present advertisement as news? Is there clear distinction between promotional stuff and news stories?
- Is advertisers' influence evident in news stories/editorials?

Some representative cases. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Style

- Does the newspaper seem to have house style?

Quantitative aspect: How many newspapers seem having own house style? How many of them seem not having any house style?

Qualitative aspect: some representative cases. Any trend analysis? Note the worst stuffs in this category!

Emphasis on Reliability

There must be reliability. To ensure reliability:

- have sufficient discussion among the coders for standardized understanding of the indicators' operational definitions;
- ensure maximum uniformity in data entry;

- ensure maximum use of inter-coder cooperation (peer support); and
- do not hesitate to consult the Team Leader at any stage of data collection and data entry.

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