

Role of Journalists and Media in Digital Society

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1) A CURRENT & RELEVANT TOPIC

I am very happy that you have chosen a very current and relevant topic for this UCIP Refresher Programme: “Role of Journalists and Media in Digital Society.” The topic is very relevant because, as Vat. II decree “Inter Mirifica” on Social Communication recognized years back, the mass media continue to influence us enormously in our digital society.

2) MY ENCOUNTER WITH DIGITAL WORLD

My very first encounter with the digital world was in London in 1975. I went there to study journalism. Then, I became a member of Swiss Cottage Library. I marveled that when I borrowed a book from the library or returned a book, I did not have to fill any form or signed any record as I used to do in India. The library clerk just took a digital pen and drew a line on my library membership card and another line on the book’s ISBN number. The digital pen did not leave any line or mark neither on my library card nor on the book!

Then, I was looking for a book which I wanted to read very much. But the Swiss Cottage Library did not have the book. I was disappointed that such a big library did not have the book!

Then, the librarian told me not to worry but to come back and collect the book after three days. The Library had the facility of digital searching and locating the book in one or other libraries in London or in the whole of England! and reaching it to the client.

In those days there were no ATMs in London. But I could punch a number at a window of the bank in which I held an account and submit my bank passbook and I could get the money I wanted from the bank on a Sunday or a holiday. Then, I would get back my updated pass book in a day or two by post.

Some thirty five years ago digital services and facilities were rare in the world. But today practically the whole world has become a digital society and so today we speak of the role of journalists in a digital society.

3) DIGITAL WORLD TODAY

Let me share with you some more experiences of the digital world in which we live. I went to meet the President of SIGNIS India (World Catholic Association of people in audio-visual media) Fr. Rappai Poothokaren, S.J. in his office in Gurjarvani, Ahmedabad. He was working at his computer with LCD screen. There were no printer or paper or pen anywhere in sight! When I remarked about it, Fr. Poothokaren just said that “in the digital world we don’t need paper and printer!”

Well, most of us have not reached that state to do away with pen, paper and computer - printer in our offices in our digital society. But we are keenly aware that we live in a digital society.

I remember my introduction to the computer world. It was my second visit to USA in Feb. 1982. Much earlier in the late 1950s I was introduced to typing in English because my maternal uncle Msgr. Mathew Vellankal of Kothamangalam Diocese in Kerala had a portable typewriter and I was fascinated with it. So while in high school in 1962 I joined a typing school and learned the touch system of typing. So when I went to USA first time in 1977 I have been given an electronic type writer to use for my work first in St Catherine's Church, a suburban parish at Bronx in New York for one month and then for 2 months as a sub-editor in the office of St. Anthony Messenger at Cincinnati, Ohio.

4) MY INTRODUCTION TO COMPUTER

My second visit to USA in 1982 was to attend the UCIP council meeting at Boston in my capacity as the Vice President of International Federation of Church News Services. After the Council Meeting I spent one month in the office of Catholic News Service (CNS - the biggest Church news service in the world) to work and learn about news agency journalism. I was the Executive Director & Chief Editor of SAR News (South Asian Religious News) at New Delhi.

CNS office then had a computer which occupied practically the whole space of a room 10x10x10 feet and we reporters had monitors & key board terminals on our desks. I had on my desk both an electronic typewriter and a computer monitor & key board. On the first two days I used only the electronic typewriter to edit the news reports which the editor Mr. Dick Daw passed to me. On the 3rd day Mr. Daw came to my table and told me to use the computer.

I remember the conversation between Mr. Daw and me.

Mr. Daw: Fr. Varghese, why don't you enter the reports in to the computer and then edit them so that another person need not key it again.

Varghese: Thanks Mr. Daw for the encouragement. But you know that I am preparing to go back and work in India. There I will be lucky to have a typewriter. And I do not expect to have a computer to work in my office in India at least for the next 10 years.

Mr. Daw: Who knows if you will have a computer in 10 years or not. But you try using the computer here. Learning something new will always be useful.

I took Mr. Daw's advice and started using the computer in CNS office at Washington in 1982.

Back in India I was using my portable Olympic typewriter for my correspondence as well as for writing reports for SAR News.

5) ELECTRONIC TYPEWRITER & COMPUTER

Then, in 1986 I bought a bi-lingual electronic typewriter which, the company sales-man told me, is only the second one sold in Ahmedabad, the biggest city in Gujarat.

Later when the volume of works increased in my office I bought my first desktop computer in 1988, that is, certainly in less than 10 years after learning to use a computer in Washington, USA. Then I bought an A T Computer with 3 additional terminals for LAN system (Local Area Network) in 1991 to coordinate and supervise the works in the office as the Director of Catholic Information Service Society (CISS) and also as the Chief Editor of DOOT.

Then, during my visits abroad to attend UCIP council meetings once a year for 24 years, I always learnt something new about computer and other latest electronic communications in the digital world. Then, on my return to India I would teach my new knowledge to my staff personnel in DOOT and CISS offices. Slowly computer became part and parcel of office work in India.

During my trips abroad I learnt about Microsoft introducing new programme like window 95 and window 98 etc and I would get them in India. After the UCIP World Congress in Canada, when I visited USA I saw first time Microsoft Power Point 2007. A young couple Shiji & Selvam gifted me a laptop computer with the programme which I am using now.

When Apple computer and Microsoft were reigning supreme in the computer world some 11 years back in 1998 Google Company was launched which changed the computer world with free internet search facilities. In the same year 1998 the first downloadable ring tones for mobile phones appeared in Finland.

6) WORLD OF INTERNET

During the past decade we have come to a stage that we cannot live without these facilities of internet search engine and the many facilities of the mobile phone. I have resorted several times to Google search while preparing this talk.

As Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI said in 40th World Communication Day Message 2006: “Technological advances in media have in certain respects conquered time and space, making communication between people, even when separated by vast distance, both instantaneous and direct”. (Vatican, Jan. 24, 2006)

When mobile was in vogue, I resisted the temptation by way of a gift of a brand new mobile phone from my maternal uncle Msgr. Mathew Vellankal during the Silver Jubilee celebration of my priestly ordination in 2002. But now, earlier this year, I was compelled to get and use a gifted mobile due to the constant complaints of my friends and well wishers that I am often not available when they want me even though I tell them that I sit next to a land-line phone both in my office and in my residence. But it is also a fact that I move and travel a lot in connection with my job responsibilities.

Today millions of people in India use mobile phones. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) 2007 report the mobile Internet is increasing becoming a popular feature in India where more than 200 million people use mobile phones and 7 million are added to the rolls each month”. (SIGNIS Media, No.3, 2008)

Today our lives have become so dependable on these modern gadgets like mobile phones, laptop computer and internet facilities. Mobile phone companies claim that millions of mobile phones are sold in India, China and in African countries every year.

7) WORLD OF MOBILE

While writing these lines this morning (October 8) I read in Times of India, the biggest daily newspaper in India, a news item entitled 'In alien city, let your mobile be the guide'. The San Francisco bylined AP news says: "You're walking down the street, looking for a good place to eat. You hold up your cellphone and use it like the viewfinder on a camera, so the screen shows what's in front of you. But it also shows things you couldn't see before: Brightly colored markers indicating nearby restaurants and bars.

"Turn a corner, and the markers reflect the new scene. Click a marker for a restaurant, and you can see customer reviews and price information. Decide you'd rather be sightseeing? The indicators are easily changed to give information about the building you're passing...

"These applications take advantage of the phones' GPS and compass features and access to high-speed wireless networks to mash up super-local web content with the world that surrounds you."

Some years back when I went to USA in 2007, I marveled at the Global Positioning System (GPS) which guided my cousin brother Fr. Mathew Vellankal at the wheel, who was taking me to the house of a friend where both of us have not been in the big city, San Francisco. Now I hear that GPS has come to some metropolitan cities like New Delhi and Mumbai. I do not know if Colombo has already the facility of GPS.

8) INTERNET NEWSPAPERS & E-BOOKS

Another telling example of the digital world is the facility to read important newspapers around the world in the web using your internet facility. I was writing for several years a weekly column in a Gujarati newspaper SAMBHAV published from Ahmedabad city.

While traveling abroad I could read it in Europe & America. SAMBHAV claimed that it was the first newspaper available in the web in India. I could go to internet and search the web and see - read - my article sitting in Switzerland or in USA where I had gone to attend UCIP council meetings.

In the 1990s reading newspaper in the internet was a novelty; but now it has become a common thing. When I travel abroad, if internet facilities are available I do read one or other newspapers published from my home city, Ahmedabad.

According to a newspaper reports India has 47 million internet users. A study of ViziSense, an Internet user measurement agency, "notes that Google had a 74 per cent reach among India's 47 million internet users, compare to Yahoo's 58 per cent in August". (Ahmedabad Mirror, Oct. 14, 2009)

Netizens may be familiar with the word 'Twitter'. But I did not heard about the word till this August 2009. Then, there was a controversy and it was widely reported in Indian newspapers because a Minister in India – Shashi Tharoor - used the word cattle - class referring to economy seat in a plane in his 'Twitter' website.

Twitter as you may know is a free microblogging service. Twitter allows a user to send message of 140 characters maximum. An American Jack Dorsey created Twitter in 2006. Today there are a number of social networking sites like 'facebook'.

We can see that mass media is all pervasive in our digital society. Then, unlike any other profession, journalists have ventured or entered into all fields of human endeavor. So it is good that we consider the concrete role of journalists and the media in our digital society.

To articulate the role of journalists and media, I envisage some areas of particular interest. Here our basic assumption is that a journalist is not to do his professional job exclusively for his personal good like name and monetary benefits but for the good of human persons and human community.

9) SEVEN ROLES

I like to recall here my third visit to USA in 1998 to attend a UCIP Council Meeting at Boston. The theme of the Council Meeting was the Ethics of Journalism or the Moral principles of communications. The UCIP Council Meeting discussed and approved 10 Moral / Ethical Principles for the people in the Mass Media. After the UCIP meeting I wrote a chapter of my book entitled 'Memorable Experiences'. The chapter titled 'My Third Visit to USA' has highlighted the 10 moral principles. With that background I see seven specific roles for journalists.

10) TO BE A MASTER IN THE PROFESSION

One. TO BE A MASTER IN THE PROFESSION. We live in a world of excellence and professionalism. No area of human interest is excluded from the purview of a journalist. Still a journalist cannot afford to be a jack of all and master of none. He/She need to have a comprehensive idea of the wide arena of journalism and the specialize in the area of his/her choice.

A true journalist is not one who speaks or writes for the people but one who communicate with them. Communicating with one's audience either in the print media or in the electronic media involves knowing the people, their needs and aspirations, their rights and problems, their concerns, etc. In other words, you have to mingle with all sorts of people and interact with them to be an effective journalist serving your profession well.

A journalist needs to be a master of the medium he/she uses to communicate. It could be the print medium or the ever expanding electronic medium. For a journalist medium is as important as the message. He/She also needs to have respect for the receiver or the audience of his medium.

When I was studying journalism at London in 1975 the Director in London School of Journalism told us, the students that, as print media journalists you have to have good command of the language. Though you are not going to be compositors or printers, you need also to know how a compositor or a printer works.

Gaining some knowledge of composing and printing helped me immensely when on my return to India I was the editor of a family Magazine, DOOT. I remember one incident. I had indicated to the printer for certain way of layout of the cover page which was different from the tradition.

The compositor of many years of experience in Anand Press told me, “Fr. Varghese, your layout of the cover page is not practical. We cannot compose two lines in an angle on the top right corner!”

I showed the compositor a commercial business magazine with a similar way of layout.

“Well, it must be from some foreign countries or from some big metropolitan city. But here we do not know how to compose for such layout.”

The compositor acknowledged a change in his position from “we cannot compose such layout” to “we do not know how to compose such layout.”

Fortunately for me I had worked one month in a big printing press at Calicut for a month in 1983. So I went to the compositors’ table and composed the cover page exactly according to my layout.

“Hey, Father! You know?!” The compositor expressed both his wonder and amazement. Well, now the computer does such things. But at the time of hand-composing age composing and presenting something deferent and off beat was a novelty and it also needed more time and are than traditional lay out!

11) RESPECT FOR TRUTH.

Two. RESPECT FOR TRUTH. A journalist is called to respect the truth and make sure that he/she communicates only true information in all charity. A journalist is exposed to all sort of information. He/She will have to all sorts of people from crooks to saints, from self-seekers to philanthropists to deal with.

There are publicity seekers and news-planters that may pass to a journalist true or false formation. So a journalist needs to be an his/her guard that the publisher or sends to publish only true and reliable news and other information. The thumb rules of a journalist are check and verify his news and news sources. There has been an instances of communal riots and deaths due to false information or truth shared without charity and discernment.

Our digital world can easily be manipulated. For instance, a lot of false things are fed into the world wide web (www) and the users of internet need to check and double check for the veracity of information available in the internet. So a journalist in our digital world needs to be extra

cautious and make sure that his/her news and informations are true and dependable. So the role of a journalist is that of an advocate of Truth.

After all as Greek dramatist Sophocles said, “The Truth is always the strongest argument.”

12) RESPECT FOR HUMAN PERSONS.

Three. RESPECT FOR HUMAN PERSONS. A journalist has a special role in promoting respect for human person in our often dehumanizing, mechanistic, depersonalized digital world. My faith tells me that God has made us, the human beings as the centre of his creation and entrusted us to take care of the whole creation.

The Vatican document ‘Ethics in Communications’ issued on World Communication Day 2000 says, “The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons” (21).

So a journalist should refrain from or keep away from anything that demeans a person or do harm to humanity in one way or other.

Similarly, a journalist’s care and attention are not limited to individual person but to the whole human community; because, a human person is part and parcel of his/her human community. So the Vatican document further says that, “The good of persons cannot be realized apart from the common good of the communities to which they belong”. (22)

13) SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Four. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY. A committed journalist cannot take the attitude of Cain who asked, “Am I supposed to take care of my brother?” (Gen.4, 9).

Truly a Catholic / Christian journalist is his/her brother’s keeper. We have a responsibility towards all our brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor, dalit, down-trodden.

Here Gandhiji’s principle is very relevant and valid. Gandhiji wanted people to ask a question before executing a programme or making a policy: Will my policy or action benefit the last man in the street or the most poor person in a village?

As journalists and writers we need to work for the common good of the maximum number of the people especially the poor.

British philosopher Jeremy Bentham said that, “The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.” We live, move and have our existence in a human society. So as journalists and writers we contribute for the welfare of the whole society. That is our social responsibility a reports and other writings should be reflect the fact that uphold and promote social responsibility.

14) PROMOTION OF HUMAN VALUES

Five. PROMOTION OF HUMAN VALUES. In our times of globalization, cut-throat competition, consumerism and money-power, human values are often ignored or neglected. Human values of genuine love, trust, service, kindness cooperation, etc. promote life and make like worth living. But upholding and promoting these values are often like swimming against the current.

Newspapers are often filled with negative and depressive stories. Against-such daily experiences we can be alert to write success stories, examples of upholding values of life. If we search for them we will discover that there are more people who uphold moral and ethical values and live accordingly than the robbers and criminals who get limelight for their notorious actions!

When a journalist or write uphold values in his/her writings and reports, then the common people will trust him/her and read his/her writings and may even pass information which may be useful in his/her journalist profession.

15) MAKE THE BEST OF THE DIGITAL WORLD

Six. MAKE THE BEST OF THE DIGITAL WORLD. In our digital world journalist and writers need to be abreast with the times. This is possible for us by mastering the modern technology of the digital world pertaining to our profession. Our reading, reporting, writing and spreading what we write are always in need of updating. We need to constantly update ourselves in the digital world.

Today we are confronted with or rather we are privileged with many new languages of the digital world. Many words like 'blog', twitter, e-learning, i-phone, SMS, e-mail, etc. which we use today will not be found in the best-dictionaries published some 10 years back.

Take for instance the word 'blog'. While writing this I opened Oxford Dictionary & Thesaurus 2001 edition. The word 'blog' is not there! They say that the word is there in the most recent Oxford & Webster's Dictionary. Millions of internet users use the word and communicate with others through 'blog'.

Here I would like to quote an old friend in the media, Fr. George A. Hess. In his article "To blog, or not or blog" in Wavelength, July 2006 Fr. Hess says, "People using the internet found ways to post their ideas and questions on the globecovering web. These postings were referred to as Weblogs which quickly became shortened to blogs. The word blog means to post an idea on the Internet for people of all races and nations to read and comment upon. The idea is a blog: the action of doing it, the verb, is to blog."

We need also aware of the pitfalls and drawbacks of the digital world. There are young and old getting addicted to the digital world like digital games or getting cheated by false promises and informations. One can get got up in the digital world forgetting one's basic needs life food, physical exercise as well as one's personal and family responsibilities.

When a writer or journalist is competent in the digital world and is aware of its pitfalls, then he/she can make the best use of it according to his/her needs and expertise.

16) PROMOTE A CULTURE OF PEACE.

Seven. PROMOTE A CULTURE OF PEACE. I envisage a journalist's role as promoter of the culture of peace. In our digital world we are aware of so much evil around us like lack of honesty and crimes of all sorts. There are violences against children, women, dalits, poor and others who are not able to defend themselves.

A journalist or writer can help to reverse this trend of crimes and violence in the society by promoting more affirmative stories, human rights and development news pushing negative stories to margins.

We need to develop our capacity to live with the people of different races, cultures, languages and religions, etc.

We need to uphold the dignity of a person irrespective of his/her different background. This calls for much tolerance and deep understanding.

The culture of peace is possible only with justice and equality. So we need to work to establish justice and equality especially among people who suffer much injustice in the hands of the powerful and oppressive structure.

Mass media have the capacity to mediate peace by helping to remove injustice and inequalities especially among the poor and the down trodden.

We need to be specially alert to structural injustice and inequalities built in to our religions or governance. We can fail in our responsibilities if we support sectarian identities and favour violence in sensationalizing and stirring up hatred.

But above all, culture of peace should begin with ourselves by being aware of our own values and attitudes which might be justifying the injustice and inequalities in our midst. The question is, do we commit ourselves totally to give voice to the voiceless, to defend those who are not able to defend themselves?

Thanks for your patient listening.

Finally let us recall the Maxim which Pope Paul VI proposed for the World Peace Day in 1972: "If you want peace, work for justice."

No lasting peace is possible without justice. This is true of the Indian state Gujarat which saw pogrom against the Muslims in 2002 while Shri Narendra Modi was and still is the Chief Minister.

This is also true of Sri Lanka which saw an end to the ethnic war but thousands of its Citizens are still languishing in government camps without basic amenities. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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