

# Comment & Criticism

Comment and criticism allows for a shorter and topical style of academic writing. Designed to accommodate comments on recent events as well as providing for a more polemic styles of academic writing we hope you will find that some of these pieces are thought-provoking and often controversial.

They are published to allow journalism academics to give voice to major issues with only limited research in order to seek collaborators, spark debate, or produce a proposal prior to fuller research. To comment on all papers go to [www.journalism-education.org](http://www.journalism-education.org)

## Identity crisis vs. Ethical dilemmas: The struggle of practicing journalism in a small hill town of India

**Pradeep Nair, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dhar-amshala, India**

### Abstract

Small town journalism is often about telling the good and the bad stories pertinent to everyday life of a town. It defines and reflects the perspectives of the people living in a

place closely knitted socially and culturally. Dharamshala, a small hill town at the foothills of the Himalayas spread over 70 acres, more than 7,000 ft. above sea level is globally known as the home of the Dalai Lama. A cosmopolitan town of tech savvy monks and scholars from across the globe frequently visiting the place to know and learn the Tibetan Art and Culture, the local newspapers are still the most sought-out sources for information. This study looks at how journalism practices in their classical form emerged and evolved from the socio-political economy of a small town and intends to explore the ethical and the professional dilemmas of local journalists reporting stories of institutions, organizations, agencies and people whom they know personally. The study further investigates the social and the cultural ties of the journalists with their communities and the way this conflict of interest influences the decisions of the journalist to cover local issues and events.

### Key Words

Journalism, Small Town Dynamics, Journalistic Identity, Ethical Dilemmas, News Coverage

**The notion of a small town has long been central to the concept of community journalism and attracts attention from researchers who want to understand the decision-making processes in journalism practice, especially related to conflicts of interest and ethical pressures.**

This study investigates the professional and ethical issues of small town journalists who are mostly untrained and struggle between the twin identities of a community member and a journalist and face small-town pressures and reservations often compelling them to duck an issue to avoid confrontation due to their easy accessibility to readers.

## The Ethical Dilemmas

Most of the interviewed journalists of the town newspapers didn't have a formal education in journalism but have a fair professional understanding of then when and how of the local occurrences and their importance to print. In many cases, the situation becomes difficult for the town journalists to report the cases that are sensitive and there is no policy to handle the situation (Allan, 2005). Since most of them were not formally trained in mainstream newsroom they often struggle to keep a balance between the public interest and news value of the story and their own fear of disturbing/offending the people whom they know closely.

The small town newspaper editors in Dharamshala seldom have the understanding that

it is the duty of the journalist to tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience however difficult it is to do so. Further, the community pressures and the struggle to survive and to run the show often conflict with journalism ethics. Most of the stories published in town newspapers from Dharamshala are the stories of ordinary happenings which interest the local readers and are not covered by the big mainstream newspapers. Being the most trusted source of local news, the town newspapers of Dharamshala mostly reflect the perspective of the local community and this is where the loyalties of the journalists working in these newspapers comes into conflict with the decisions to publish controversial issues. Sometime even though the journalist knows the truth he/she is compelled to duck the issue because of community pressures and reservations and to avoid conflict (Lauterer, 2000).

Most of the newspapers published from Dharamshala are owned by independent owners and don't have enough financial backup, the owner in many cases decides to shy away from controversial issues as it will offend his/her own relationship with the prominent members of the community. Since, the notion of community is central to the town newspaper's concept of circulation and readership, the journalist's/editor's/owner's own community connections creates ethical dilemmas to the decision-making processes regarding conflicts of interest and societal and economic pressures (Anderson, 1987). The struggle to define the role as community members and journalists often clash with journalism ethics. To understand the struggle of small town journalists to follow media ethics it is important to explore the relationship a town journalist have with the town people. In a small place like Dharamshala, people know everyone working in the local newspaper. The trust and rapport of the journalist with the local people often pose conflicts of interest, which most journalism code of ethics warn about (Deuze, 2005). The Code of Ethics suggested by the Press Council of India and the Editors Guild clearly states that conflicts of interest are to be avoided, but in contrast, it is very common for the journalists working in Dharamshala to get involved in civic organizations and many of them also hold elected positions. How the journalists serving in the board of community organizations, schools, and colleges keep themselves fair, objective and balanced when reporting the stories of the same is interesting for the researchers who look at community connections and the ethics of news reporting. The competing loyalties of small town journalists is more problematic than working in a big city newspaper as often the credibility of small town journalist as impartial is questioned especially when their involvement in the community creates problems with conflict of interest (Stamm & Cambell, 1983).

## The Identity Crisis

Most of the journalists interviewed by the researcher for this study admitted that often they have to decide their role first as a community member then as a journalist and their bonding with the locale replaces journalism motives. The stress to strengthen democracy in their role of a journalist, their involvement in public life and their stake in the community they cover pose a challenge to their own approach to journalism (Merritt, 1995). Their involvement in the community they cover sometimes distances them from the truth. Most of the journalists interviewed admitted that they don't have a life outside the office of the newspaper if they aren't involved in civic activities. The dynamics of a small town pose serious ethical dilemmas for journalists as they have a face in the community and that's why working in a small town newspaper is different from working in a big city newspaper where the journalist is faceless to his/her audience (Ornebring, 2010). Reporting on local religious/communal issues becomes difficult when community pressures influence the content (Fitzgerald, 1996). Even though knowing it well that a story like Karmapa is not in the Gyuto Monastery from last eighteen months or news related to the deteriorating health of his Holiness The Dalai Lama is newsworthy, the local newspapers of Dharamshala handle them differently from the larger dailies. Often they prefer to bypass the difficulties of reporting the sensitive issues of Tibetan settlement by implementing a blanket policy of not reporting them as the Tibetan community has lot of political and economic influence on the local community. Further, nor the journalist neither the newspaper wants

to upset the Tibetan community as it matters in Dharamshala.

## The Socio-Economic Pressures

Newspapers must be prepared to print all the news if they are to survive (Pumarlo, 2005). This can be true with any big city newspaper but in a small town newspaper office in Dharamshala, the socio-economic pressures from the community often influence the content. The 85 per cent of editors of the Dharamshala town newspapers interviewed for this study admitted that often they receive internal pressures to kill a story. Further they have to withdraw a story or modify it accordingly as per the directions of the advertisers because of their vulnerability to advertisers' threats as the number of advertisers is limited and the dependency of newspaper on advertising is more because of small circulation. There is no policy to deal with the socio-economic pressures related to news decisions and that is why the decision of the editor to publish news can be easily tested and questioned from ethical and moral point of view.

The livelihood of the studied town newspapers largely depends on the town businesses as 90 per cent of the advertising revenue comes from the local merchants. Without merchant's advertising, it is very difficult for the small newspapers to survive (O'Brien, 2003). Although the newspaper makes the community's economy work by advertising, the community had least concern for the economic growth of the newspaper.

## Methodology

The study follows qualitative research approach with an objective to explore how Dharamshala based journalists distinguish between their identities as community members and as journalists and how often and to what extent the social, the cultural and the economic ties of the journalists to their respective communities affect decisions about news coverage.

Interviews and observation techniques were used to collect the data. Interviews were conducted with the journalists/editors/owners of the local newspapers published from Dharamshala and further interactions were conducted in the form of focus group discussions to explore the ethical concerns of small town journalism. Seven daily newspapers are published from Dharamshala and all of them are published in Hindi language only. The Tibetan settlement doesn't have any print version but a number of web newspapers and portals are operated from McLeodganj, covering the news related to the Tibetan government in exile.

Six daily newspapers were selected for the study having a circulation of less than 10,000 copies and cover a population of 25,000. The total number of interviews conducted was 21 – 9 working journalists, 3 advertisers, 5 editors, and 4 owners of the newspapers. 90 per cent of the questions were open ended, and the subjects were interviewed one-by-one. A tape recorder with a microphone was used with the interviews and after the data was collected, the tapes were transcribed. The data was then coded into thematic blocks as – conflict of interest, community pressures, identity crisis, and ethical dilemmas and were analyzed accordingly to the identified themes. The data was further validated by cross-checking with the interviewed participants.

Grounded theory is used to identify the themes that arose from the data collected at the field visits. The theory was derived from the data, systematically gathered and analyzed through a logical process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Without having any preconceived notions, the author used the inductive characteristics of grounded theory identified by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to critically analyze situations to enhance understanding of the research objectives.

The data collected through interviews and focus group discussions was in narrative form and the themes were culled from the interviews by using the narrative approach. Experi-

ences of newspaper editors, owners and journalists were critically interpreted to obtain deeper meaning to the research. The questions prepared for the interviews were framed on the basis of thematic identification of issues for study and the views were presented in narrative form to bring consistency to the study. The narrations were further triangulated with the observation conducted at the newspaper offices to increase the validity of the research.

## Analysis

The analysis of the data collected through interviews shows that the levels of community involvement of the journalists have a notable conflict with journalism codes of conduct which clearly says that the journalist should remain uninvolved in community affairs. Most participants of the study were connected to their communities through home ownership, business ownership, social networks, and active social and political organizational involvement.

Talking about the difficulties of separating their community life from their professional journalistic life, several participants admitted that they had often experienced conflicts of interest with their newspapers and organizations to which they belong.

*"We are aware that our closeness with the community put pressures on the news decisions we made but it also makes our job easy and we have quick access to certain things which otherwise is not possible.", said one.*

These identity assertions are mainly centered on the idea that they (journalists) never did any effort to distinguish between their roles as community members and as journalists (Rosen, 1993). They were in the assumption that it was difficult separating the two.

Seven out of the nine journalists said that they were actively involved in various community affairs and have formal engagement in the form of membership.

*"We are first community members rather than journalist. We are same both at home and in the office. How can we hide our identity as everyone in the community knows us personally? People talk to us not because that we are working in press rather because we are one of them."*

One third of the interviewed newspaper staff including reporters, editors and owners said they found it difficult to separate their personal life for their job, as their direct community involvement make their job easy as the representatives of the newspapers they work. It further enhances their accessibility to the community people and their prominence as journalists.

*"We are often approached by community members when we are off work as the people didn't distinguish us separately as a journalist and as an ordinary community person. For them we are always newspaper people. Our prominence in the community hardly allow us to separate our job from our personal life. People never separate us from our job and to stay in the business you always have to be a newspaper person."*

The ethical dilemmas that influence the decision of publishing or withdrawing news in the newsroom of the newspapers, the participants have varied experience in the term of rate of occurrence. Some of them said they dealt with the problems every second-third day. Others said once in a week or less frequently.

*"Sometime it becomes very difficult while reporting the organizations where we were involved as members. Getting involved in a community, organization and event often brings more benefit than a conflict of interest. Involvement helps us to generate stories. We hadn't heard much about Journalism Code of Ethics as most of us don't have a formal education in journalism. We really don't know when and how to avoid involvement or public office."*

Interestingly, the owners and editors of these newspapers do not bother about the involvement of their staff in public offices. They won't discourage them.

*"What is wrong if a journalist is involved in a community organization? Journalists are responsible people and they are in tune with what is going on in the town. Their involvement often makes it easy to get news and advertisement also. It could be problematic for a big newspaper, but for a small newspaper like us, it is very difficult to follow the ethics of journalism as we don't pay much to our journalists. They need other means to survive."*

Despite having a high level of involvement in the community affairs, the majority of the journalists interviewed said they believe that they are carrying their role as news providers

in ethical ways and they mostly try their best to be objective while covering the news of the events where they are directly involved.

*“We don't know what kind of objectivity is required from us. We put the stories straight-forward, matter-of-fact way. People don't tell all sides of the story. Talking to everyone helps you to tell the truth. That is what we were concerned. We give both sides of the story and puts the facts out there.”*

While analyzing certain stories related to the conflict of interest, it was found that the personal feelings of the journalist for a particular organization or event have influenced the coverage of the story. In many cases, the stories were less hard hitting than ideally they should be. So, balancing community involvement with journalistic detachment is a challenge for most of journalists consulted for the study.

## Discussion

The participants of the study, especially the journalists and newspaper editors/owners admitted that being to involved in community affairs creates problem for the credibility of the journalists. But in a small town like Dharamshala if you really want to know the context of various community events/affairs, you have to be engaged. The pressure of getting the news as soon as possible pressurises the journalists to be involved in community affairs which further the ethical challenges by showing the visibility of the involvement. Avoiding ethical conflicts requires constant oversight, and potential conflicts can especially be a minefield in small town newspapers (Pumarlo, 2005). In Dharamshala, especially when the reporter/editor of the newspaper himself was involved in certain civic organizations, navigating regular news coverage have lots of ethical concerns. To deal with them, you have to be square with the public. You have to communicate regularly with readers when these potential conflicts arise. You also have to convene internal discussion inside the newsroom to explore the best course of action. Some of the editors of the newspapers surveyed for this study admitted that consistency and fairness is required when sensitive news issues are to be covered and the newsroom also needs a plan. But in a small town newspaper, the newsroom is neither professional nor mature enough to define the news issue and to identify the values. The precedence of covering sensitive community issues and getting the story without disturbing an individual's privacy, requires journalistic maturity which comes through wider exposure to such situations. In a small hill town like Dharamshala, where most of the journalists do not have a formal training in journalism and have no experience of working in a sophisticated newsroom, dealing with the ethical principles of decision-making is the toughest challenges one faces in his/her professional life. How to assess their loyalties as journalists, what kind of business/professional decision is required to publish a story needs a deeper understanding to study the ethical dilemmas of small town journalists (Yarros, 1922). Taking a decision to publish a story and following a set of ethical guidelines are essential for any newspaper operations but the hows and whys of a journalist approach to a story differs from newspapers to newspapers. The editors participating in this study argued that in many cases it is not possible for the newsroom to think ethically but efforts are certainly required to develop a policy to deal with ethically challenging issues. Regular discussion with the people within and outside the newsroom is not a standard practice in the surveyed newsrooms, although it has a scope to develop common consensus in the newsroom and to have different perspectives before making a final call to publish or withdraw a news story.

On the question of the Journalists Code of Ethics saying that a journalist should always act 'independently' (Ward, 2010), the interviewed journalists argued that following too much ethics will make them aloof and uncaring about the community and they will have the risk of being unable to learn of events, issues and trends in the community. Differing from this, the surveyed editors said that they mostly decide to publish a story if it serves a valid public interest even though it might offend someone prominent in the community. In the case of small town newspapers like the ones published from Dharamshala, ethics is not a field of black and white where one position is ethical and all other are unethical, every time and in every situation the editor/owner and the journalist have to weigh values and make decisions and have to be honest with the community people about those decisions (Carlson, 2015).

And this certainly makes journalism ethics in small town newsrooms a complex issue.

## Conclusion

Ethical issues in the newsrooms of a small town like Dharamshala is more common than the newsrooms of big newspapers published from other parts of the country. Out of the studied newsrooms, 95 per cent of the journalists have no idea of the scope of journalism ethics and interestingly none of the surveyed newspaper offices have published a code of ethics and never have they posted it for their journalists to examine. The newspaper's newsroom doesn't have any kind of policy understanding to deal with the pressure of withholding a story or changing the scope of the story. One of the most prevailing issues often faced by the newsrooms of the studied newspapers is the conflict of interest aroused due to the involvement of the news people in community affairs and this often produces bias in news coverage and presentation. There are different ethical guidelines proposed by various media agencies but the editors of these small newspapers have less idea how to implement them in small, close-knit newsroom operating in a small place where people personally know each other and journalists are not exceptions. The small town social and cultural dynamics hardly allow the journalism profession to draw a clear separation on newspaper employees' participation in community institutions (Carlson, 2015). In Dharamshala, the newspapers are more vibrant and the employees of the newspaper regularly contribute in community initiatives. It becomes difficult for the journalist to separate his/her identity as a journalist and as a community member and this often creates serious conflict of interests, ethical dilemmas and credibility issues. The ethical challenges to control or stop community participation by newsroom employees is not possible in a small town setting. The only way to handle this is to take the tough decisions to publish a story if the arguments were convincing by declaring the potential conflict of to the readers. To bring transparency in news coverage, the newspaper should be square with its readers (Ward, 2010). The other challenge is to avoid alienation of news sources or advertisers to maintain traditional journalistic integrity (Anderson, 1987). In the process of making everyone happy in the community, the small town newspapers often violates the moral code of journalism. The approach to smooth over controversy and avoid conflict often ceases the interest of the reader of the newspaper and over a period of time the paper has a possibility to lose its importance as a trusted source of information. Small town journalism ethics pose decision making challenges for both the reporter and the editor all the time and the only solution is to discuss this within their newspaper operations and to convince the reader about the potential conflict of interest related to a news-story. For any small town newspaper, the only strategy to exhibit pride in the community as an honest information provider is to publish a story of public interest without any bias and prejudices.

## References

- Allan, S. (2005). *Journalism: Critical Issues*. Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 6-13.
- Anderson, D. (1987). How Managing Editors View and Deal with Ethical Issues. *Journalism Quarterly*, 64(2), 341-345.
- Carlson, M., (2015) Introduction: The many boundaries of journalism. In Carlson, M & Lewis, S. C.(Eds) *Boundaries of journalism : professionalism, practices and participation*, Routledge, NY (7-12).
- Deuze, M. (2005). What is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists reconsidered. *Journalism*, 6(4), 442-464.
- Fitzgerald, M. (1996). *Building Newspapers and Communities*. Editor & Publisher, 129, 26-27.
- Lauterer, J. (2000). *Community Journalism, a Personal Approach*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Merritt, D. (1995). Public Journalism – Defining a Democratic Art. *Media Studies Journal*, 9(3), 125-132.
- O'Brien, M. (2003). Covering a Community from Within: Many small-town Editors say there is no other way. *The Quill*, 91(4), 16-19.

Örnebring H. (2010). Reassessing Journalism as a Profession. In Allan, S. (Ed), *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism* (pp.38-42). New York, NY: Routledge.

Pumarlo, J. (2005). *Bad News and Good Judgement: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper*. Oak Park, IL: Marion Street Press.

Rosen, J. (1993). Beyond Objectivity. *Nieman Reports*, 47, 48-53.

Stamm, K., & Fortini-Cambell, L. (1983). The relationship of community ties to newspaper use. *Journalism Monographs*, 84.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons, and Evaluative Criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13 (1), 3-19.

Ward, Stephen J.A. (2010). Inventing Objectivity: New Philosophical Foundations. In Meyers, Christopher (ed.): *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 137-152.

Yarros, V.S. (1922). Journalism, Ethics, and Common Sense. *International Journal of Ethics*, 32(4), 410-419.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.