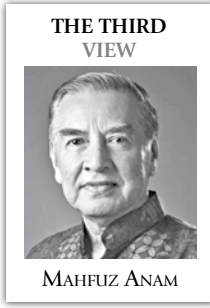


PM's Commitment to Free Press

The real test is in practice



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

NOTHING could please us more than to hear Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reiterate her commitment to the freedom of the press and democracy. But does it match with how the

Digital Security Act operates, especially against journalists?

We couldn't agree more when the PM called on us to shun unethical and yellow journalism and keep in mind the interest of the nation and its people with the utmost importance. She quoted Bangabandhu as saying, "Like unprincipled (mitheen) politics, unprincipled journalism also cannot bring good to the society." Again, we couldn't agree more.

The problem arises when we question: who decides what constitutes "unethical" journalism? Who decides what is in the "national" and "public" interest? Is it the "public" or the "powers that be"? (The latter have all the coercive machinery of the state to turn things their way, while the public must wait another five years to have their say, which too can now be "custom-made".)

The PM also urged us to engage

context and outright lies are spread against well-researched investigative reports, and when fact-based editorial positions are termed to have a yellow hue.

It is the media's pledge to the public and its bounden duty to expose cases of abuse of power, corruption, waste of resources, and the depriving of citizens of their individual and collective rights. When a government claims to have done this or that, a fundamental fact is not given prominence—that is, everything is being done with public money. When a specific project estimated to cost a particular amount ends up costing several times more—without any credible reason—it is "we the people" who pay for it. So the media is bound to investigate and report how public money is spent. Very often, as recent revelations have also proven, government high-ups don't even know how public money is being wasted, syphoned off or just gobbled up through false papers or fake submissions. It is only when the media reveals them that some action is taken. We dare say if the media did not report, all such cases would never have seen the light of day.

By and large, the mainstream media in Bangladesh follows the broad ethical codes of the profession. But when a rare example of a rotten apple comes to the fore, it is cited as an example of how the whole media behaves. We have

was jailed, nor was the NYT sued for treason, which might have been the case elsewhere. Issues of far lesser gravity have landed many here with sedition charges.

The case of NYT publishing the classified Pentagon Papers (which contained secret documents about US involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967), against the wishes of the US government, is another celebrated example of who defines the "national interest". The US constitution did

subjected to. (He had to defect to the UK to do so.) He went against his own country's "national interest" and exposed, through *The Sunday Times*, the killing machine that his own army had become, dramatically changing the world public opinion in favour of our independence struggle. His book *"The Rape of Bangladesh"*, published in 1971, raised global awareness about the crimes against humanity, which was our case during the recently held war crimes trial.

Late Saifur Rahman, BNP's finance minister for several times, while in opposition once saw this writer at a diplomatic reception and introduced *The Daily Star* "as the conscience keeper of the nation." Later, on another occasion, after he returned to power and saw me in a similar event, literally shouted out "here comes the enemy of the government." I politely replied, "Saifur Bhai, I am where I was but you have moved from one side of the fence to the other and with it your views about things have become the exact opposite."

I recount the above story only to drive home the point that the attitude towards an independent media drastically differs with being "in or out of power". When in opposition, an independent media is the "conscience", and when in power, we are the "enemy". We are neither—just committed and ethical journalists performing our professional duty.

Coming back to the issue of "unethical" journalism, definitely it is something that we must abhor and shun with every breath in our body. However, quite often critical journalism is termed as unethical just because it embarrasses the government or puts it in an awkward position or even proves it to be corrupt. We are accused of "confusing" the people because we are contesting the government version, and we are supposedly not serving the public interest just because we are opposing the official narrative.

A vital lesson to learn from the socialist/communist failure is that they never allowed the official narrative to be contested, with the result that they were never aware that the ground was shifting under their feet. Finally, when the day came, a 70-year-old system collapsed from within. In my view, one of the vital reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed along with all its "friendly" countries was because they never allowed a free and independent press. The Brezhnev and Kosygin of the day did not know how corrupt their regimes had become, how little public support they enjoyed, and how little influence they had on the public view of things. All because of the absence of a free media.

In reading Bangabandhu's *"Unfinished Memoirs"* and *"Prison Dairies"*, especially the latter, it is clear how attached he was to newspapers and how respectful he was of this profession. Recently, in an op-ed column that we carried, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina shared her own stories of growing up with newspapers. An intrinsic respect for journalism is obvious in both. We would like to assure the prime minister that we remain essentially of the same genre with the vital difference that now she is the focus of most of our attention—both positive and critical.

The journalism of her younger days was single-mindedly focused on gaining our independence. The goal for the people, as well as for journalism, was crystal clear. The task at hand was not to question but to enthusiastically rally behind. The demand of the day was sacrifice—sacrifice everything including our lives.

Then she was a freedom fighter. Now she is the head of government which, by definition, is a highly complex institution, and running it is one of the most exacting tasks that there is, especially when a country has as many challenges as we do. Journalism of today is focused on nation building whose important ingredients are democracy, freedom, rights, accountability, transparency and good governance.

None of the above can be assured without an independent, free and ethical media. As Walter Cronkite, a global icon of quality journalism, said, "Freedom of the press is not just an important part of democracy, it is democracy."

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File photo of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

not empower the government to forcibly stop its publication. The government went to the Supreme Court, where its petition was thrown out, making for one of the most famous cases on the First Amendment to the US Constitution. (This is an excellent example of media-judiciary collaboration to uphold the freedom of the former. Without the judiciary giving unwavering support to the free press, it is very difficult to withstand assaults by governments. Two examples illustrate the point: the Trump administration tried its best to muzzle the press but the court prevented him; In Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, Myanmar, etc., there is no such protection of the press by the courts.)

In South Asia, one of the crowning examples of ethical journalism is what Anthony Mascarenhas, a Pakistani journalist, did in 1971. The military junta brought him along with several others for a visit to East Pakistan to see and report on how the army had "saved Pakistan" from the Bengali traitors. Upon their return, the other journalists sang the military's song while Anthony Mascarenhas revealed to the world, in graphic detail, the genocide that we Bengalis were being

Wasn't supporting Bangabandhu's Six Points against the "national interest" of Pakistan? Those of us who are old enough to have passed a part of our lives in Pakistan remember the role that most newspapers consistently and unwaveringly played in supporting the case for our political autonomy, cultural identity, share of the economic pie, and freedom of expression and democracy—causes that were personified by Bangabandhu. All those papers and the journalists who worked tirelessly at that time could have easily been accused of sedition for "working against the state" and "confusing" the public, if seen from the perspective of the government of the day.

Let us consider the media coverage of the "caretaker government movement" spearheaded by Awami League during the 1993-96 period. Those of us who saw the merit of the demand and supported it through reporting, columns and editorials were writing something that the government of the day considered to be anti-constitutional (since the caretaker government concept was not in our constitution), anti-government, against the "national interest", and an attempt to "confuse" the public.



An independent and ethical media is crucial to ensure democracy, people's freedoms and rights, and good governance.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

in "constructive criticism" but not to "confuse" the people. Here, we could do with some details as to what constitutes constructive criticism. For example, up to what point is criticising the government "constructive", and when do our criticisms start to become destructive?

A government elected for a specific period of time is by definition going to use all its power and influence to get itself re-elected by any means possible, sometimes even bending democratic norms and reinterpreting the legal regime. At that moment, what should a media committed to the "public interest" do?

For politicians, national interest and party interest often appear to be the same (we cannot cite one example where a politician opposed their own party because they thought it went against public interest; given the nature of our politics, it just cannot happen). And thus we hear them accusing us of hurting the national interest when, in reality, we are just exposing corruption and crimes. While we talk about "yellow journalism"—and we accept the criticism with bowed heads and due humility as and when it occurs—we may also raise the issue of "yellow criticism" when unfounded, out-of-

stood firm in supporting democracy, secularism, national sovereignty, illegal takeover of power, etc. We have loudly proclaimed and celebrated every success that our people and government have achieved. No credible example can be cited where the media took a position that was against the public interest.

The differences in perception/definition/interpretation of what constitutes "national" or "public" interest between a government and the media are historical. Some examples will illustrate the point.

In 1961, soon after assuming power, US President John F. Kennedy was preparing to invade Cuba and topple Castro by landing troops at the Bay of Pigs. *The New York Times* found out about it and was preparing to report. The story goes that President Kennedy personally called the editor of NYT urging him not to publish it, saying that printing the story would jeopardise the US national interest and endanger lives of American troops. The NYT editor said, attacking Cuba is against the US national interest and it is the administration—not the paper—that was jeopardising American lives by waging an illegal war. The story was eventually printed and the invasion ended in a total fiasco. No journalist

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QUOTABLE Quote

ANATOLE FRANCE
(1844-1924)
French writer.

An education isn't how much you have committed to memory, or even how much you know. It's being able to differentiate between what you know and what you don't.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Publicity act
- 6 Buds
- 11 Pay tribute to
- 12 Incurred, as debt
- 13 Stomach
- 14 Upper crust
- 15 Wrestling need
- 16 Honey
- 18 Candle count
- 19 Easy target
- 20 Terminate
- 21 Junction
- 23 All set
- 25 Ulna's place
- 28 Director Howard
- 28 Sink feature
- 30 Leafy vegetable
- 33 Rollaway bed

DOWN

- 1 Native healer
- 2 Trinidad's neighbor
- 3 Chaplin was one of its founders
- 4 Silent assent
- 5 Lock
- 6 Vining plant
- 7 Sound
- 8 October 24 honoree
- 9 Revolt at sea
- 10 Ignore the limit
- 17 Simple card game
- 22 Memorable time
- 24 Fine, to NASA
- 26 Mosque tower
- 28 Murdered
- 29 Negating word
- 31 Highland boy
- 32 Pencil end
- 33 Spiny flora
- 35 Majestic
- 38 Like bucks
- 42 Lennon's love

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

WELL, HOW DO YOU LIKE MY REPORT, SIR?

THE BEGINNING IS OKAY, THE MIDDLE IS FAIR AND THE END IS GOOD, BUT...

BUT WHAT, SIR?

THE END IS TOO FAR FROM THE BEGINNING...

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

GLAD SOFTY
LINE THRIVE
ASTA REAGAN
MAILCALL
ARTIST ODE
JOINT DELLS
ASK JUNKET
RAILROAD
ALTAH MARY
TEASET OBOE
EDGAR TENS

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

SO ARE YOU GOING TO BUY ME SOME PURPLE HAIR DYE?

ZOE...

...YOU HAVE SUCH A BEAUTIFUL HAIR. I CAN'T DO IT.

I UNDERSTAND.

WHERE'S THE PURPLE SPRAY PAINT?

MIDDLE SHELF, BY THE DROPLIGHTS.