

Media Professionals Perception on Bribe and Corruption

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Bribery among journalists could be seen widely in many places but is a comparatively less researched topic. It would be surprising for an average news consumer to know that the sometimes news story he reads in print or views on television might be the product of a bribe or some sort of incentive received by the journalist who covered that news. After all, we read and watch news on the sordid details of corruption in government and society in general through the media with such alarming alacrity, but would almost have never known about corruption in the media they subscribe. Moreover, when one talks about corruption in media, it is about how the media reports on corruption (Transparency international, 2013) or on 'paid news' where the aspect of how the media establishments publish news after accepting monetary assistance (Press Council of India, 2010).

Instances of bribery are a common feature in press meets and events especially in developing nations including India. Cash, gift vouchers or expensive items are distributed to reporters as well as photographers or videographers along with their press kits, sometimes even openly. Similarly, there are situations where money, land-plots and other rewards are handed over to selected journalists, both by government as well as private establishments for preferential media coverage (Ristow, 2010).

Though there have not been any empirical studies in this area particularly in India, some reports do indicate the presence of such a phenomenon. In one instance at Puri in Odisha, journalists themselves complained of attempts to bribe them. The scribes complained that a member of parliament with the political party Biju Janatha Dal, Pinaki Mishra had tried to bribe them by inserting cash of 200 rupees in envelopes along with the press kits after a press conference. Similarly the then union coal minister, Beni Prasad Verma was accused in Parliament by the Opposition of trying to bribe journalists. In fact, a study done across the world on the prevalence of bribery among journalists by Kruckeberg (2003) had ranked 33 nations on the possibility for the prevalence of 'cash for news phenomenon'. India was ranked in the 25th place while China was ranked 33rd which was the last place in the list.

These reports might indicate that the phenomenon is widespread in many countries. However there have not been any major studies with regard to the subject in India. This study through in-depth interviews with journalists, photographers, editors and also news sources attempts to find out the prevalence and reason behind the issue. Besides what they perceive as bribes and what could help stop the practice will also be inquired.

There is no consensus with regard to the definition of corruption or bribery. However, some of the major definitions formulated by various organizations and scholars could help us to formulate the concept. For instance, World Bank (1997) defines corruption as 'the abuse of public office for private gain'. Another definition for bribe is "A bribe is anything, especially money, that is given or promised to induce a person to do something illegal or wrong or anything given or promised to induce a person to do something

against his wishes" (Guralnik as cited in Velbovets, 2012).

Referring to bribery among journalists, Okunna (as cited in Okoro and Onuoho, 2013) describes it as, 'monetary bribe handed over to a journalist to pressurize him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants'. Skjerdal (2010) states that bribery among journalists involves 'transfer of various types of rewards from sources to the reporter'.

Bribery among the media personnel has to be viewed seriously as one of the major effects of bribery is that the journalist is forced to do a story which otherwise may not be of any value or interest to the society at large (Okoro, 2013). Several reasons have been cited for bribery among journalists. They range from the low salaries earned by journalists, to lack of professional ethics and the socio-cultural situations of the society where the journalists function to various other possible factors (Ristow, 2010).

The most common reason cited by many scholars is the low salaries offered to journalists. They argue that this forces many of the journalists to accept bribes. Mabweazara (2010) journalists knew it was unethical, but were forced to accept them due to their poor financial conditions. A similar opinion was expressed by Kasoma (2009) and Ndangam (2010) who studied journalists in Ghana and Cameroon, respectively.

Adeyemi (2013) said that around 75 per cent of the journalists in Nigeria agreed that corruption is rampant in the profession. He attributed a combination of reasons but poor pay was the major reason cited by him. These studies are some of the many studies which attribute low pay as the major factor causing corruption. Transparency International (2013) too reports that the low salaries contribute to corruption and advised media organizations to initiate steps to address this problem.

It has also been pointed out that there are several among the well-paid journalists who take bribes (Mak'Ochieng, 1994). Moreover, even when many journalists claim that they accept bribes because of their poor salary scales, some researchers indicate that an increase in the pay scales may not be enough to eradicate this practice. Ekeanyanwu & Obianigwe (2002) who studied journalists in Nigeria found that, only 34 per cent agreed that an increase in wages could stop bribery.

Apart from poor salaries received by journalists, another important factor cited by scholars is the everyday culture of the society where the journalist operates. Yang (2012) said that in countries where free press is comparatively new, the legal regulations as well as professional regulations would be at an early stage of development. In such places, corruption might be rampant. Ristow (2010) too agreed that a culture and social acceptance of corruption encouraged bribery. In a study among Indonesian journalists, Hanitzsch (2005) observed that the everyday culture of the society too determines corruption. He observed that even many of the educated young journalists justify corruption as they experience them regularly. Wu (2011) observed that many journalists viewed bribes as a legitimate source of secondary income.

Substantiating this argument, Dirbaba (2010) reported that most of the new entrants to journalism are first introduced to bribery as an acceptable practice by their peers and even seniors. This could give an impression in the minds of a young journalist that bribery is acceptable. Some feel that in societies where corruption is rife, corruption will be more prevalent Elahi (2013) and Omenugha & Oji, (2008). In other words, where corruption is rampant, the people might perceive it as normal.

Gaining credence to this argument, Sanders (as cited by Skjerdal, 2008) said that bribery which was prevalent in United States and England till the start of the 19th century had ceased to exist even though the working conditions of the journalists continued to be terrible. Sanders claimed that the professional codes of ethics which were formulated had brought an end to such practices in these countries.

Nwabueze (2010) found that there was a lack of orientation with regard to journalistic ethics among most of the journalists. Many of them saw gifts and money given by sources as a kind gesture from the sources and not as ethical issues. Similarly there are instances where journalists express confusions regarding gifts and money. Grynko (2012) found that Ukrainian journalists faced a similar situation. At the same time, this too has been disputed who point out that even in media organizations which have a set of codified ethical guidelines, there have been hardly any improvement (Mare & Brand, 2010).

Mayiga (2011) said that a lack of formal education in journalism tempted many journalists to be corrupt. This deprives them of an opportunity to know more about media ethics. Moreover, a lack of educational background in journalism, the journalists find it difficult to get better paid jobs which encourage them to be corrupt. Yang (2012) observed that in countries where there is more intensive journalistic education, bribery was less.

Mudhai (2007) pointed out that corruption became rampant among media persons in Kenya after the 1990s when several political parties emerged in the country which gave the media personnel opportunities to be corrupt. Mang'anda (2012) also attributed the greed of reporters for indulging in corruption. He opined that decisions on right and wrong of individuals mattered on resorting to corruption.

Studying corruption, especially the distribution and acceptance of bribery has always been a sensitive subject (Miller, et al., 2000). The researchers demonstrate that indirect questions through face-to-face interviews could help obtain correct results from bribe takers on the extent to which corruption is practiced. In this study the researchers too embarked on a qualitative study with semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

A total of 50 persons including journalists from various part of the country were interviewed for this study during February to May 2015. The interviewees include 40 journalists and 10 news sources which include public relation professionals, as well as individuals who act as news sources like businessmen and representatives of firms who deal with journalists for the purpose of distributing news.

Among the ten news sources and public relations officials who were interviewed, three of them worked with leading PR organizations based in the metro cities. Three owners of educational institutions in Kerala, Hyderabad and a businessman from a tier two city in Tamil Nadu were also interviewed. One catholic priest who acts as a PR official of a cultural organization run by the church was also interviewed. The responses given by journalists were cross-checked with these news sources to verify the statements given by either side. Journalists from various organizations who have an experience between two to thirty years were interviewed. This was a mix of vernacular and English media organizations. The journalists from other parts of the country, other than Kerala and Tamil Nadu were limited to the English press only. Initially, they were asked questions with regard to the existence and prevalence of corruption. They were then asked questions about the number of years spent in journalism, the incentives and money allotted for reporting by their respective organizations. They were also asked if this amount was sufficient to meet the expenses for their reporting duties. This was followed by asking them if they were forced to accept 'travel allowances' and other incentives offered by their news sources. Questions were put forward to public relations executives as well as news sources including businessmen, owners of educational institutions about bribery. They were asked about their expenses to hold press meets as well as the money they had to give to each journalist as bribes or gifts in the areas of their operation.

Out of forty journalists interviewed, only two said that there weren't seen any sort of corruption among media persons that they had come across. They were reporters who

had worked in Kerala, with an experience of less than three years. But the rest thirty-eight journalists including those from Kerala said that bribery which included either one or a combination of cash, freebies and gifts was prevalent among journalists. Variations across states and places are evident. For instance, journalists in Tamil Nadu opined that cash was handed over to journalists in envelopes. Cash between 200 and 500 rupees are distributed to journalists after press meets. Journalists working in some of the metro cities said this could range up to 1 to 3 thousand rupees. In certain situations, the money offered could be more depending on the place. Similarly, distribution of cash vouchers and other gifts are also common in press meets. However those from the neighboring state of Kerala said that cash was not handed over to journalists. But gifts and even cash vouchers were given at press meets especially during product launch ceremony. All the journalists who worked in Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Mumbai said that they had been offered money or freebies at some point of time in their career. Similarly, some journalists in Kerala said that though cash is relatively absent, freebies and benefits from ministers and politicians are sought by journalists. The journalists were initially asked to give an approximate number of those who accepted bribes. Except seven journalists, the rest said that there was a correlation between poor salaries and bribery. When probed, journalists said that around 70 to 90 per cent of those who accepted them were those who worked in the media outlets where salaries are relatively less. While most of the leading English and vernacular newspapers start with a salary in the range between 20 to 25 thousand rupees, many others are known to start with even one third of this. In fact it could take an experience of around two decades to reach them the starting salaries of the leading media outlets.

Several journalists reported similar instances, implying that journalists from many such media outlets were forced to accept bribes. In fact, many of these organizations are known to accept this behaviour on the part of the journalists as a 'secondary income'. At the same time, journalists did indicate that an increase in the salaries would not stop this practice as it was a 'learnt' practice. Similarly, some of the journalists said that insecurity in the job market was also one of the reasons to compel at least some of them to resort to such practices. This was attributed more to those from the language press.

The journalists who discussed the phenomenon expressed diverse views on the topic of completion. As mentioned above most of the journalists attributed this to low pay, to other reasons ranging from the individual's decision to socio-cultural factors. Many of them had personal experiences to narrate. The journalists who vehemently denied that bribery was linked to low pay said that the individual's decision of right or wrong and lack of professional ethics were the major reasons. These journalists pointed out that there were instances of bribery among the well-paid journalists.

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