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Who owns the 'Fourth Estate' in Bangladesh?



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At Kellogg School of Management in Chicago, USA, we possibly got the best teacher in Professor Daniel Diermeier to teach us the interaction of business and politics, crisis leadership, reputation management as well as impact of media relationship in protecting global brands. He brought in the idea of 'fourth estate' and its role in taking the organisation, society and nations forward.

The 'fourth estate' is the public press, referred to as a collective and encompassing photographers, journalists, television broadcasters, and radio announcers, among others. Many people generally agree that the fourth estate has immense political and social power, thanks to the fact that the press can be used to shape societies while imparting news of note and commentary of interest. Because the fourth estate is recognised as such an important body, many nations have laws which protect the rights of the press, ensuring that citizens have access to reporting on matters of interest and of note.

It was the middle of the 19th century when the press has been referred as a fourth estate, referencing the fact that most parliaments and other houses of government had an area set aside specifically for the use of the press, and pointing out that the press was a distinct group within the larger framework of the realm.

The press plays a very important role in most societies, reporting on a wide variety of topics and creating powerful personalities who are relied upon for sources of information and commentary. Writing about the first estate in 1841, Thomas Carlyle, The Scottish essayist, pointed out that the press had a powerful role in parliamentary procedure, shaping the will of the people and influencing the outcome of votes among the government, as well. Carlyle also argued that the press was an important part of a democratic society, saying that writing gives people “a tongue which others will listen to.”

Because of the importance of journalism in society, most members of the fourth estate abide by certain professional and personal ethics. Many journalists attempt to cultivate an air of neutrality, focusing on reporting of the issues as they are so that people can judge the facts for themselves, while others focus on offering commentary and analysis from the perspective of a particular position. Journalists are careful as a whole to protect the integrity of the press, protecting sources, verifying information before publication, and using a variety of other techniques to convey a trustworthy appearance to the public, encouraging people to put their faith in the press.

Democracy is impossible without a free press. This is a rule that is deeply inbuilt in democratic theory and practice. Contemporary democratic theory appreciates the media’s role in ensuring governments are held accountable. In both new and old democracies, the concept of the media as watchdog and not merely a passive recorder of events are widely accepted. Governments, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions of officials and institutions. The press is guardian of the public interest, warning citizens against those who are doing them harm. A fearless and effective watchdog is critical in fledgling democracies where institutions are weak and hit by political pressure. When legislatures, judiciaries and other oversight bodies are powerless against the mighty or are themselves corruptible, the media are often left as the only check against the abuse of power. This requires that they play a heroic role, exposing the excesses of presidents, prime ministers, legislators and magistrates despite risks.

In a country like Bangladesh where people are sceptical, for good reasons, about what the opposition leaders pour out in their speeches either in parliament or mass-gatherings, they largely depend on the independent mass media that echo their voices. Take it or leave it, they also treat the journalists as real public representatives.

Though not recognised by governments yet, political scientists treat mass media as the ‘fourth estate’ in a democratic system. According to the website answers.com the four estates of democracy are Legislative (Law making) Executive (Policy execution) Judiciary (reviewing the law) Press (Reporting the system honestly). When there is weak governance or weak capacity of the three former estates, there comes the accountability to the press that is the fourth estate to take the responsibility to a larger extent. The media is a conscience keeper. The electronic media

is more influential than print media. Both these media can also help build peace and social consensus, without which democracy is threatened. In Bangladesh most of the owners of the electronic media and newspapers are business people or some known political figures, who sometimes are blamed for conveying the influenced or biased news to the public. It has become a modern trend of the influential people or political figures to own a television channel or a newspaper, in order to save their reputation and to become someone who can fight back if someone threatens him/her. But what should the media be doing ideally? They should assist democracy which requires the active participation of citizens. Ideally, the media should keep citizens engaged in the business of governance by informing, educating and mobilising the public. The environment is a crucial factor for media to be fair to the public. Only if the environment permits, media can play a positive role in democracy. They need the necessary skills for the kind of in-depth reporting that a new democracy requires. The media should be fair enough and should be held accountable to the public. The media people should inbuilt the ethical and professional standards into themselves. Media needs independence which can only be achieved if it is free. The media should also be accessible to as wide a segment of society as possible.

What we see now-a-days is that media sometimes work in favour of some political parties or for some influential personalities. This kind of activities by media reduces public trust. The media should be more prone to openness to citizen and should convey the true fact to the citizen and let them form the opinion. Media should turn themselves as the 'voice' of the general public and should fight on behalf of the citizen. Most of the times, they should be seen as platform provider for 'free flow of information'.

The fourth estate in Bangladesh also plays its noble role for the greater interest of this nation, mostly the marginalised or common people. The media has played a crucial role in promoting the human rights in Bangladesh, especially with respect to women's rights. In Bangladesh, the press supports NGO initiatives to strengthen human rights and to campaign against gender discrimination, repression of women and religious extremism. The press has also made the people of Bangladesh more aware of their fundamental human rights and constitutional protections than in the past. Now-a-days, media seems to be the only gate keeper against 'winner takes it all' in the political area and atrocities committed by some political hoodlums. We have also seen their mettle during almost all natural calamities. Now increasingly we are seeing them supportive of 'national wealth creation' and entrepreneurship as well as private sector successes.

Now the big question comes up, who owns this 'fourth estate' in Bangladesh. We know the answer to the question, who should own? — obviously the readers or broader readership. Despite most of the journalists or media people, if not all seen to be biased towards noble causes and gate keeper of 'justice, equity and liberal thinking', not necessarily their owners belong to same 'school of thought'. And, the success of the fourth estate to perform at its best remains to be an

issue to be championed by their editors, journalists, readers, and conscience of the nation.

The writer teaches at BRAC Business School. This article is the excerpt of a class lecture on 'Role of media in market reforms and national progress'. The writer has borrowed references from Wise geek, UNDP, answer.com, Judith Lichtenberg's "Democracy and the Mass Media", and from the article "Liberal constraints on private power?" by Stephen Holmes.