

CORRUPTION AMONG JOURNALISTS: PREVALENCE AND PRACTICE

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Abstract— Corruption among journalists is an understudied area of communication research in India, though it has been a widely-discussed topic in the mainstream media. In the present study, as many as 15 journalists from Tier-2 cities in India were chosen for a qualitative research based on interviews. Journalists included in the study were reporters, sub-editors and photographers from English as well as language dailies. A set of questions on the existence of corruption, their involvement and the factors that could affect this unethical practice was served to the respondents. Based on these in-depth interviews, it can be cautiously assumed that bribery and corruption are prevalent among journalists in Tier-2 Indian cities. Several factors such as low pay, lack of education and lack of supervision were identified as reasons for the prevalence of corruption among journalists.

Keywords: Journalism, corruption, bribery, press bias

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Introduction

The usual discourse on corruption in media is centred on the issue of financial dealings between the owners of mass media establishments and news sources. But one aspect which remains neglected is the nexus between news sources and the beat reporter. A handful of researchers have observed that corruption at lower levels was widespread across the world (Ristow, 2010). Kruckeberg (2003), who studied bribery among journalists in 33 countries and ranked them accordingly, found India at 25, while China was ranked 33. At the same time (Ristow, 2010), it was noted that there were instances where journalists and bloggers even in countries like the United States accepted bribes.

Studies on corruption at lower levels, especially among the journalists in India, are lacking. There were news reports that discuss corruption at the level of individual reporters and journalists, for favourable news coverage to news sources (Indian Express, 2014 and DNA, 2014). Corruption at the grassroots level can lead to manipulation of news. This may not be in the best interests of the reader, but to merely satisfy the bribe giver (PCI, 2010). Hence, the present study is proposed to study the factors that could possibly exert an effect on corruption among journalists in the Indian context. For this study, as many as 15 journalists working in Tier-Two cities across the country were chosen. Using in-depth interviews, this study initiates a discussion on the prevalence and practise of the problem and identify possible factors.

Definition of corruption: The definition of corruption varies depending on the context and approach. A commonly used definition describes corruption as 'the abuse of public office for private gain.' Referring to cash for news, Okunna (2003) defined bribery among journalists as 'money handed over to a journalist to pressurise him or her into doing what the bribe giver wants.' Besides institutional concepts, there were several definitions based on laws. The Prevention of Corruption Act (1988) on corruption among government officials defined corruption as the following. "Monetary or any other gratifications, except legal

remuneration, which is meant to influence a public servant.” This could be valid in the case of journalists, too. Skjerdal (2010) defined the practice of bribery among journalists as an ‘activity which involves transfer of various types of rewards from sources to the reporter.’

Review of literature

As stated above, most studies with regard to bribery among journalists were conducted in African nations, apart from a few countries such as the post-Soviet Union nations as well as Asian countries. Most studies pointed to the prevalence of corruption among journalists and identified several factors influencing this trend: from poor pay to journalists, socio-cultural factors, lack of formal education in journalism and ethics, lack of monitoring among media organisations and peer pressure to individual motives among several other reasons.

Mabweazara (2010) observed that journalists sought bribes because of low salaries. His Zimbabwe study also noted that most scribes were critical of the practice but yet indulged in it. Ndangam (2010) echoed similar views. Similarly, Lodamo (2009), Skjerdal (2010), Chuma (2013), Kasoma (2007) and Dirbaba (2010) also cited low pay as the primary cause for corruption, among a few others.

Meanwhile, despite the blame on low pay, Ekeanyanwu and Obianigwe (2002) observed that only 34 percent of the Nigerian journalists agreed that an increase in wages could stop bribery. Only 43 percent of the respondents in Nwabueze’s (2010) study cited poor remuneration as the major reason for journalists accepting bribes. This indicated that journalists themselves perceived that there might be reasons other than low pay leading them to bribery. Also, there were cases of well-paid journalists being corrupt (Mak’Ochieng, 1994).

However, it can be assumed that low pay was one of the important factors cited. Many journalists felt that where salaries of journalists were comparatively less, it should be increased (Ristow (2010). Similarly, Transparency International (2013) suggested that the pay scales of journalists should be documented and published. This was

to motivate the establishments to raise the pay and thus not to give the journalists a justification for accepting bribes and undue favours.

Meanwhile, Diedong (2008) stated that decisions on right and wrong of individuals mattered on one's willingness to be corrupt or not. Nwabueze (2010) also observed that some of the well-paid journalists were corrupt. Mudhai (2007) found rampant corruption among media personnel in Kenya after the 1990s when new political parties emerged. Similarly, Lodamo and Skjerdal (2010) argued that blaming poor pay could be mere justification by journalists. Mang'anda (2012) observed that greed, low salaries and poor economic conditions can foster bribery.

Adeyemi (2013) and Ristow (2010) suggested punitive measures as possible deterrents. Transparency International (2013), too, suggested that cases of corruption should be brought out. Helander (2010) reported that many media organisations did not monitor whether their journalists indulged in wrongdoings. Citing lack of professional ethics as another cause, several scholars observed that an increased awareness on ethics among journalists could bring down corruption.

Sanders (as cited by Skjerdal, 2009) claimed that bribery among journalists had ceased to exist in the United States and Britain by the end of the 19th Century though their working conditions continued to be terrible. Professional codes of ethics were formulated around this period. Sanders advocated an orientation in professional values as a way to curb corruption in the media. However, several well-known incidents in the United States (nbcnews.com, 2015) had documented instances of corruption but these scholars insisted that bribes distributed in a mass scale is absent in the developed world.

Echoing similar views, Adeyemi (2013) and Okoro and Onuoho (2013) suggested that journalists should be sensitised about corrupt practices. Lodamo and Skjerdal (2010) observed that a lack of ethical consciousness is one of the major factors. A lack of orientation on ethics was noted among many of the journalists they surveyed. Many of them saw gifts and money given by news sources as a kind gesture and not as moral transgressions. Transparency International (2013) opined that

a lack of the enforcement of ethical codes coupled with economic circumstances caused corruption. The type of favours accepted by journalists also depends on their orientation in ethical principles. Grynko (2012) found that Ukrainian journalists were critical of cash being accepted for news. But at the same time, they did not show the same attitude towards incentives like gifts and other benefits.

Elahi (2013) suggested that ethical training to journalists could reduce corruption. Adeyemi (2013) said that a combination of improving the welfare of journalists, along with massive campaigns by media organizations, and sanctions on erring journalists was the only way to arrest the trend. Though this view might look shortsighted, it has been reported (Mpagze and A White, 2010) that journalists especially in rural areas and those who are not educated in journalism may not be aware of ethical implications.

Onyebadi and Fawaz (2014) opined that providing training to journalists on media ethics could solve corruption among journalists. According to these researchers, journalists should be oriented about the ethical aspects (Transparency International, 2013). They suggest periodic training programmes for journalists.

At the same time, the view that having ethical policies will curb the practice has been challenged. Mare and Brand (2010) found that in many instances even where the media organizations did have ethical policies, they were not followed. Many editors have come up with well-defined ethical policies. But these measures have done little in curbing the practice in many places.

Yet another factor which has been documented as possible causes for corruption is the relative lack of educational qualification. Mayiga (2011) opined that a lack of formal education in journalism tempted many journalists to be corrupt. With a lack of educational background in journalism, the journalists find it difficult to get better paid jobs in established media outlets encouraging them to be corrupt. Some have observed that in countries where there is more intensive journalistic

education, bribery was comparatively less (Yang, 2012). This leads to suggestions of more educational programmes.

Yet another significant aspect which has been studied is the cultural aspect. In most of the places, the new journalists do not know that the profession they are part of, gives them an opportunity to be corrupt. They are thus initiated into this practice by the news sources and sometimes even by senior journalists.

Dirbaba (2010) observed that may not know of such practices and they are first introduced to this as an acceptable practice by others. So the cultural factors as well as peer pressure from colleagues make many a journalist corrupt. Yang (2012) too observed that there is the possibility of cultural factors playing a positive role, contributing to corruption. Kasoma (2009) in her study about the phenomenon in Ghana and Zambia observed that journalists cannot survive without accepting bribes due to the intense peer pressure.

Hanitzsch (2005) observed that among Indonesian journalists apart from their insufficient pay, the everyday culture of the society tempts them to be corrupt. Many of them justify corruption. Herman Wassermann (as cited in Skjerdal, 2010) argues that bribery among journalists should be viewed as part of the socio-economic conditions where journalists work. Ristow (2010) also opined that culture and a social acceptance of bribes were also the reasons for causing bribery.

There are also researchers who have pointed out that the general economic conditions of a country and the relative lack of democracy as factors. These too could be classified under the cultural factors. Elahi (2013) attributed corruption among journalists in Bangladesh due to the poor economic conditions of the country.

Yang (2012) observed that an established democracy and improved economic conditions in a county could reduce the practice. It is also suggested that when a society is corrupt, it affects all walks of life, including journalism (Omenugha & Oji, 2008). In many places journalists do not view the practice as objectionable. For instance,

Tsetsura (2005) in her study on Polish media found that PR executives perceive the problem of 'news for cash' more seriously than journalists.

Apart from all these there have been other aspects pointed out by researchers as possible factors. The absence of fear of having to face consequences could encourage corrupt behaviour. Nwabueze (2010) among others said that punitive measures should be taken to curb this trend. He found that there have been hardly any measures to monitor corruption by media institutions where it is rampant. This might be one of the necessary measures required to bring in awareness on this.

Helander (201) who advocates punitive measures to counter such practices says that the pay scales of journalists should be reviewed periodically so that journalists will not use poor pay as an excuse for accepting bribes. Media organizations should have a policy of taking transparent and stern measures against such practices. Helander also recommended regular surveys to be held to reveal the pay scales of journalists across the world so that low pay scales could be revised.

At the same time, some controversial policies brought in by media organizations have been justified in the name of countering corruption. A senior official of the Times Group justified 'advertorials' as efforts to combat corruption among journalists. In the report on 'Paid News' prepared by the Press Council of India (PCI, 2010), Ravi Dhariwal, Vice-president, Bennet Coleman and Co. Ltd (BCCL) which owns the Times Group responded that they had started 'Medianet' to avoid the domination of PR people in the newsrooms. 'Medianet' where advertorials could be published was a space in their newspaper and website which will write stories of concepts or businesses after receiving payments from the sources. Responding to criticisms, Dhariwal (PCI, 2010) claimed that 'advertorials' could reduce the practice of corruption as well as the adverse influence of PR professionals among journalists.

Method of Research

An empirical study on corruption is supposed to be difficult. For one, most of those involved for fear of exposure, will not accept it openly nor

will they even respond to questionnaires. A study done in post-communist countries as part of studying the corruption situation in the healthcare system of the countries (Miller, 2000)) could shed some light on the methodology to be adopted while studying the trend. Indirect questions were asked to solicit answers. They demonstrated that indirect questions could help throw light on the issue.

Similar methods have been used in most of the studies used among journalists to understand the topic (LICADHO, 2008). So as part of this study, we have used indirect questions and followed a semi structured questionnaire. A qualitative method has been used for the purpose. A total of 15 persons involved in journalism in the tier two cities as well as rural areas across the country were approached for this study. They include eight from the English press and the rest seven from the regional newspapers and news channels. The respondents are from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Bengal. Around five English journalists and three from the regional media outlets have an experience of working in other states of the country. They were able to share the situation at those places. Among the whole, five are women. Two were from the Vernacular languages and three from English. Snowball technique was used to approach the respondents. There were three photojournalists in the group. Some of the journalists also handled Public Relations activities apart from their journalistic duties. The journalists selected had an experience between two to thirty years.

The questions were put forward in an unstructured manner. However the format of questions followed a certain mode. The journalists were asked about their educational background, number of years spent in journalism. After this, they were asked if they were provided money to meet their expenses for travel, food and others in the course of their reporting expenses. Even if they said yes or no, they were asked if they were forced to take money from their news sources to meet these expenses. Some of them demanded anonymity with regard to their names as well as organizations. As is the practice in research studies, the names of individuals or their organizations have been omitted here.

Their number of years and experience in journalism along with the state where they work has been mentioned. As some refused to reveal their ages as well as salary, questions were asked about the approximate salaries given to journalists of their experience and rank. They were asked if these salaries were adequate enough to meet their expenses incurred in the course of their reporting duties.

Among those who denied accepting money, they were asked about their peers from the same and other news organizations who accepted bribes. They were asked the methods used in circulating the money. These were several from receiving openly or secretly or they had to get them from the source later. Some of them especially in states like Kerala denied knowledge of distributing cash. Later, they were asked of the gifts given by sources. Some of them said that they accepted all gifts while some said they accepted only 'nominal' gifts or compliments like pens, or books. Their responses were recorded. These distinctions are followed by many journalists.

An appointment was taken after which the journalist was met. They were interviewed either at office, coffee shops or other mutually accepted places. A few were contacted through the social media and followed by phone calls. Almost all the conversations took more than half an hour to one hour each.

Based on the review of literature the following Research Questions have been formulated.

Research questions—

- RQ1. Are instances of bribery among journalists widespread?
- RQ2. Are low salaries a factor which causes bribery among journalists?
- RQ3. Are cultural, social factors and peer acceptance, factors which causes corruption?
- RQ4. Do lack of educational background in journalism among journalists cause more instances of corruption?

RQ5. Does a lack of orientation or training in professional journalistic ethics encourage bribery among journalists?

RQ6. Does a lack of monitoring among media managements encourage corruption?

RQ7. Is greed a factor which causes bribery among journalists?

Discussion

The study as noted above was done among the local journalists who have been working in the tier two cities in India. All the journalists said bribery is practiced. In most parts of the country, bribery is widely practiced among journalists. Cash, gifts, jobs and contracts to family members, preferential land allotments, and other methods are used to entice journalists by private news sources as well as governments. All this is done to curry the favour of the journalists as well as to gain a favourable coverage in the media apart from avoiding potential news about the news sources. A 50 year-old crime reporter (8 years of experience) with a vernacular newspaper in Tamil Nadu and working in a tier two city had this to say:

“Reporters are given cash inserted in envelopes. There will be cash ranging between Rs 200 to Rs 500 in these covers. Rarely do we get Rs 1,000. There are some but only few who do not accept these offers,” he said. This view was shared by almost all the journalists who were interviewed. However there were differences in the details. In some places like Delhi and Kerala, exchange of cash was said to be rare. However, gifts and other favours were handed over to journalists to win their favour. The conversation indicates that corruption is widely practiced among journalists in India.

With regard to the reasons, most of the journalists responded that the underlying reason behind this was the low pay scales in most of the firms. A 31-year-old crime reporter with an English newspaper in Tamil Nadu had this to say. He has eight years of experience and has worked only in this state. “There are many journalists who get anything between

Rs 5,000 to Rs 8,000, a month. In fact in most of the vernacular newspapers, a monthly salary of Rs 20,000 is the highest one can gain and that too after an experience of more than 20 years. This includes the expenses for fuel and food while reporting. So, most of their bosses know that their journalists do accept bribes and turn a blind eye towards it." This was seconded by a Tamil woman journalist who is around 28 years old. A post graduate in journalism, she is working in a leading newspaper at the moment. Earlier she had worked at a different newspaper: "The paper where I work now is one of the few newspaper in Tamil which takes prompt action against corruption among journalists. This pays comparatively better than the others too. However at the paper where I worked before, almost all the journalists used to accept money. What more even the sub-editors had to be given. If the desk people were not given their due (which may be again anywhere between Rs 100 to Rs 500), the news especially of promotional events might be omitted. In fact, such behaviour was and still is considered by the employees as well as the senior management."

The woman journalist says that with an experience of 15 years and more in journalism, being paid only around Rs 15,000, the journalists cannot make their ends meet without accepting the bribes. She claimed that only two journalists including her would abstain from accepting bribes: "I knew that if I accepted bribes I would not gain opportunities in better paid newspapers. The other was a photojournalist who hailed from a financially well-to-do family and was well-educated (which is rare among photojournalists)."

This view that the journalists had to accept money because of their low salaries is a view which is prevalent among many of the journalists. However some of the journalists took a strong view against this. However, questions on how many journalists in the media organizations they worked accepted money, gave an insight with the connection between salaries and bribes. A reporter in an English newspaper from a district in Southern Tamil Nadu had this to say of the pay differences. His views were echoed by most of the respondents:

“Most of the English newspapers, pay more than Rs 15,000 (take home salary) while most of them in Tamil newspapers and Hindi start with a monthly salary of Rs 8,000. To earn the amount which a beginner in English newspaper is paid, could take more than a decade. So they hardly have a choice. And if you check who takes more, you will find that around 80 percent of the reporters in the vernacular dailies accept bribes while in the English newspapers will be around 20 percent.”

This view was shared by some of the journalists who dabble in Public Relations activities. A 54-year-old Tamil journalist who organizes publicity events agreed to this. “Most of those who take bribes are those from the vernacular newspapers. They are less in the English press. So is the case with a particular Tamil newspaper which is one of the market leaders, and a new news channel.” These two organizations was later learnt to be paying almost on par (or at least better than the other vernacular media outlets) with English newspapers. Similar views were expressed by most of the journalists who were interviewed.

Though some of them (mostly journalists in the English media) initially questioned the argument that poor pay was merely an argument, when asked ‘how many journalists in your organization accept bribes and compare it from the low paid, some of them accepted that low pay could be one factor. Except two journalists, the rest attributed poor pay as a possible reason.

These conversations could enough first two Research Question that bribery is widespread among journalists, and that low salaries are a substantially contributing reason for the same.

However, it is also a fact that there are journalists from the better paid media outlets who demand bribes and favours.

Similarly, there are journalists who are poorly paid but remain ethical. The possible reasons could be discussed below.

Another interesting observation which validates this aspect is the prevalence of corruption among photojournalists.

Many journalists in the English papers reported that, the practice was higher among photojournalists than reporters. A senior reporter in

an English newspaper in Tamil Nadu who has worked in many parts of the country had this to say: For some reason we see that most of the photographers especially the senior hands, are corrupt. This is the case not just in Tamil Nadu, but in many parts of the country.”

An interview with some of the photojournalists revealed that most of them had begun their careers in vernacular media outlets where the pay was less and corruption was the norm.

This brings up an additional point that, an ‘acquired’ behaviour may not be changed later. This too proves that poor pay may have a direct relation or a motivation to accept bribes.

The next question is regarding cultural and peer factors. A Malayalam journalist (whose organization pays on a par with most of the leading English papers) who had worked in Tamil Nadu said that the culture of a place is a predictable factor: “We see that the practice is comparatively less in Kerala, where as more in Tamil Nadu. It might be because there are more private businesses and their events on a regular basis in Tamil Nadu, which has contributed to the practice. However, some journalists from our paper when transferred to states like Tamil Nadu become corrupt.” Kerala based journalists have indicated that the practice of paying bribes in envelopes is openly practiced in some places but not in the state. It doesn’t mean, that the practice is absent, but that the open practice is absent.

This indicates that socio-cultural factors might have a role in the same. When bribes are taken openly and one sees his peers accepting them, there could be a pressure to follow the practice. This has been reported by some journalists as well as in past studies that many of the time, new journalists are initiated into this practice by their colleagues.

This brings the third research question which seeks a relation between an educational backgrounds in journalism. Here, the journalists did not agree with the statement. A reporter with 11 years of experience in English newspapers dismissed the idea: “It is not that the person who accepts bribe, does not realize the importance of ethics or even knowledge.” He was in fact speaking about the question of

educational background as well as orientation in ethics. Most of the journalists echoed the same views. However questioning the journalists and those who arrange events give a different answer. Most of those who accepted bribes were those who had hardly done a specialized educational course in media. At the same time, this could bring to a counter argument that those who are better educated expect openings in leading media outlets and hence are vary of their reputation.

At the same time, the respondents narrated instances of journalists with degrees and masters in journalists, indulging in corruption. However, some of them reported that the practice was comparatively minimal among those with an educational background in journalism in particular or media in general.

Therefore, this question has come up with mixed answers, though the answer seems to be a positive correlation in general.

The next aspect which could be uncovered is regarding an orientation on media ethics among journalists. Questions to this have been met with ridicule and dismissal by most of the respondents. However, it was also noted that most of the media organizations hardly organize any training programmes regarding media ethics.

However journalists especially in the English papers and the vernacular media outlets which enjoy a better reputation, do hold sessions to sensitize their journalists on ethical practices.

So regarding the question, on whether orientation on media ethics helps, may not be directly answered. However there is a vague possibility that it could help the journalists remind themselves of the possible behaviour they should adopt.

Then comes the question on enforcement of ethical guidelines. It was clearly noticed that many of the vernacular media outlets do not resort to punitive measures nor do they have a mechanism.

A leading Tamil daily has put in some measures including publishing the names of journalists who have been caught for corruption. Such actions has brought down the instances of corruption. Similarly the English media outlets too are known to take punitive

measures in case of evidence of corruption. However for the rest, it remains effectively nil, unless the incident becomes a public scandal. This in effect could turn down the instances of corruption.

With regard to the last research question on whether greed or individual motives is a causative factor, most of the journalists would agree that this is the deciding factor.

A 32 year-old English journalist who has worked in Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu has this to say: "Most of the justifications from low pay are mere excuses. It is the individual's decision to be corrupt or not."

Conclusion

Most of the respondents perceive that low pay is the major reason which encourages bribery among journalists. There are indications that 80 percent of those in the vernacular media indulge in such practices. This might be attributed to their low pay. However, other factors such as a lack of professional ethics and greed cannot be overlooked. Similar is the case with cultural factors as well as peer pressure.

A possible solution could be addressing the above concerns and undertaking punitive measures. A possible after effect of corruption among journalists is that it could cause peer pressure and nudge those journalists who are not corrupt, to eventually follow suit.

It could even affect the existence of traditional media which is already facing the onslaught of the online media.

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