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Original Review Article

Forensic Journalism and Its Socio-ethical Aspects

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Abstract

In this COVID19 pandemic era, where everyone is confined to their room or home, virtual world and online media is the only way-out for communication. Not only doctors, but reporters and media persons also have to be cautious and ethically driven to people present the information and service correctly to the home-confined common people. **Investigative Journalism** means unveiling of particular subject matter involving crimes or political corruptions or corporate wrong doings that are concealed deliberately or accidentally behind some grey facts and/or circumstances. **Forensic Journalism** is an evolutionary by product of investigative journalism. A **forensic journalist** discovers the truth and identifies lapses through study and research from it in whatever media may be available and thus they are guided by 'Ten Golden Rules. Though not new in western developed countries, *forensic journalism* is a new branch in our country. It is tough to pursue this as a career opportunity as it needs passion, hard work, perseverance, patience and my other qualities to be a good *forensic journalist*. Often, the aspirant is misguided and fooled by the glamour and myths related to it. In this review paper, a detailed discussion has been attempted on this emerging and trending topic. The definition, role, responsibility, quality, career opportunity, future trends and some myths related to forensic journalism has been covered.

1. Introduction

The whole world is going through a tough time these days due to the COVID 19 pandemic and due to that virtual world and online media is taking upper hand. In this time the duties and responsibilities of everyone is increasing. Not only the medical personnel, but the media personalities and journalists have to be more cautious and ethically driven to deal his situation, so that home-confined

common people get the information and service correctly. Though the access to different sectors decreased these days, but people are gradually being interested to be involved in newer jobs and professional works. A job which is interesting, introspective and analytical in professional field is always a coveted possession. Forensic Journalism is such an existence and possibility.

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Though not very new in developed western countries, but in India it's definitely an emerging field which has lots of possibilities in near future.

Forensic journalism- what it is actually?

As defined by the American Press Institute, "Journalism is the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities."¹ On the other hand, Cambridge Dictionary describes the work of collecting, writing and followed by publishing of news and articles in newspapers and magazines or broadcasting them on television and radio as Journalism.² The role of forensics is to apply the medical or scientific knowledge to answer legally bound questions in order to serve the Law and in turn disbursement of justice.³ Interestingly, there is something common to both of these. Journalists and forensic experts always try to find and present the answer to **5W1H** i.e. What, When, Why, Where, Who and How.⁴ A reasonable and justifiable answer to these six questions ultimately leads a journalist towards a good report and a forensic expert to a successful investigation.

Forensic Journalism, in that sense, is a combination of presenting a combination of science and law amalgamated to journalism. The origin of this is based on the existing debate of influence of news media on crime and criminal justice system. In a country like India, where the crime rate is high, forensic journalism can be treated as an evolutionary outcome of investigative journalism.⁵ Investigative Journalism simply means unveiling of particular subject matter involving crimes or political corruptions or corporate wrong doings that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally behind a chaotic mass of disorganized or puzzled facts and circumstances followed by analysis and exposure of all those to the public.⁶ Forensic Journalism is one step forward to investigative journalism and thus it crucially contributes to freedom of expression and media development related to public interests.

Why Forensic journalism?

Journalism intends to inform society about itself, as much as possible in the truest sense, and to make events public that would otherwise have been remained private.⁷ One of the major duties of a journalist is to be a civic watchdog and to achieve

this, investigation and in-depth work through proper knowledge-based research, digging, interviewing and writing is needed. All reporters are investigators who are trained to ask questions, then to uncover information and finally write the most complete true stories possible.⁸ So it is quite clear that such a report presentation on ethical, legal or social wrong-doing needs much research work, rational thinking, explanatory mind and much investment of time through which the objectivity, anonymity and public disclosure is warranted. It is not instantaneous work; rather it is developed through specifically identified stages of planning followed by reporting to adhere to accepted standards of accuracy and evidentiary value.⁸

In this present time of widening communications-based ecosystem, journalism needs to clearly show its key value-add to the public interest.⁶ In this era of media burst, often the reliability of the information is at stake. Common people do not get much source or opportunity to check the truthfulness of the news presented before them. Rather they are often driven by the glamour and glitter of presenting interface so as to hardly have the courage to disbelieve the matter even if it's a work of fiction. A forensic journalist discovers the truth and identifies lapses through study and research from it in whatever media may be available.

Duties and responsibilities of a Forensic journalist

Forensic Journalism is said to be practiced when a journalist, through proper knowledge and research, crosses the border of journalism to law in order to attain some socially important and relevant views.⁵ The work must be in accordance with the issue of 'public interest' which is referred to a quality to decide whether society will be disadvantaged by not knowing the information or will be benefitted by knowing it materially or by informed decision making.⁸ Forensic Journalists works somehow like detectives who go in depth of a questionable subject matter to formulate a hypothesis pertaining to social meaning.

A Forensic Journalists must remember the following **Ten Golden Rules**:⁹

- It's about digging deeply into an issue or topic.
- The issue or topic has to be of public interest, binding to Law, especially a crime.

- It's a process, not an event, so time consuming. 'Truth first, not hurries' is the rule.
- The report work must be original, proactive and introspective.
- The report work should produce new information or put together previously available.
- Information must be presented in a new way to reveal its significance
- It should be multi-sourced (even hostile sometimes) yet reliable.
- Because of its in-depth nature, it calls for greater resources, team working and time than a routine news report.
- The aim is not to accuse someone or something directly; rather the report should be presented in indirect statement.
- The more objective and truthful it is, the more ethically appealing it appears.

Ten 'must have' qualities of a good Forensic journalist

Some good qualities make a forensic journalist better than others:^{8,10,11}

- Passion to work in the field
- Curiosity to look into deep
- Ability to take initiative
- Logical thinking, organization and self-discipline to control instantaneous emotions
- Flexibility to acceptance
- Team-working ability and good communication skills to gather information
- Well-developed reporting skills
- Broad general knowledge and good research skills
- Determination and patience to invest time and perseverance
- Fairness and strong ethically driven character to avoid false reporting
- Discretion to increase objectivity of the report
- Courage to tell the truth and avert bias.

Some myths about Forensic journalism⁸

Forensic Journalism, as it comes from its umbrella existence of 'Investigative Journalism' comes with some myths and faulty interpretations prevailing in the common and expert community.

Focus only on 'bad news'

Majority believes this, but it's not true as the role of forensic journalism is to discover the wrongs to

correct them in future. It has role in uncovering positive news, nullifying the negative image of people or community through investigative stories.

It is about simply good reporting

Some believe that a defensive, anonymous and objectively framed report is sufficient. But journalists, in common sense, are watchdogs of the society who sniff out the wrongs and blame the culprit to bring about the change. It is important to look beyond the culprit to the faulty system to that permits or compels the wrong-doer to do such behavior.

It is a work of Lone Ranger

This is not true at all as forensic journalism cannot sustain and work without an orchestrated team effort.

Journalists are bigger than their reports

Forensic Journalism is a responsible public service; no right to openly disregard professional and ethical code of conduct is offered. This is not about enjoying an ego syntonic emotional drive.

A glamorous field gives celebrity status

This is absolutely a false impression, as work flow of this field is boringly monotonous, time consuming and often dangerous.

A field which is private media driven

Partly this is true, but not completely. There is fair number of examples where government-owned media agency lead ground breaking investigation against government itself.

Conclusion

Journalism, in current days, mostly concentrates and focuses on problem, but forensic journalism is to find an answer to it in an ethically correct and honest way.⁵ Though it often appears as a synergistic or compromising relationship between a media organization and law binding agency, but it serves interest of both the parties in a larger perspective of public interest. The minute details and angles of the crime can be addressed through a well-timed research-based work of forensic journalist. In short, Forensic Journalism will be much more impactful in near future at it reports a crime more legally.

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