

FORMATION OF FREE PRESS IN MONGOLIA: ETHICS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF JOURNALISTS

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One of the greatest successes that Mongolia has achieved during the last 15 years since it stepped into democracy and open society is the fact that free press was formed and became a reality. Although our country did not experience the development of free press and lacked specialists to carry on this task in the past, today, the whole world recognizes that Mongolia is a country with its free press. Moreover, Mongolia stands in the front row among the post-socialist countries according to these indices. Free press – the rostrum of openness and pluralism – is the inseparable component of democracy. It is impossible to imagine free press without democracy or vice versa. One politician said: "There can't be democracy without freedom of press. Since any problem must be open to the public, it is impossible to solve the conflicts and

arguments without freedom of press." This quote emphasizes the importance of free press in a society. Therefore, the role of free press is often compared with "fourth estate," "fourth power," and "watchdog."

Since pluralism was accepted in Mongolia in 1990 and was confirmed by the new Constitution in 1992, a whole network of free press appeared in a relatively short period of time. Although journalism went through a complicated path and faced a number of obstacles, it is advancing step by step and has found its way to development.

First, it is worth to note some of the positive phenomena that are seen from the activities of our journalism. As the number of media exceeded 2000 and a large information network was formed, the promptness and accessibility of information improved apparently. The vivid examples are the facts that 8 newspapers are published daily, 5 TV channels broadcast their programs nationwide, and the total number of 44 radio stations (34 of them are

FM radios) and 37 televisions (15 of them are cable televisions) function in the whole country. Free press is playing an important role in the development of freedom of expression and is helping the citizens enjoy their rights granted by the Constitution. It can be explained by the increasing number of letters sent to editorial offices, in which people express their opinions, give their comments about the current social problems and offer possible solutions. The editorial offices also pay special attention to them. Such letters are the bridge between the public and the government, as well as the source of important publications and programs. They help journalism become the rostrum of openness and pluralism and achieve the role to control. They are one of the clear manifestations that people's trust in journalism is increasing.

The roles of media to inform, educate, communicate, supervise and entertain became more significant. Our media is concentrating on making the information prompt, accessible, open and pluralist. It is visible from the publication and broadcast policy of any media that our journalism is stepping forward to adopt the functions and

principles of the world free press and is paying attention to the audience's needs and interests. In brief, the theories and methodologies of our journalism have changed and are developing further.

In recent years, the capacity of some newspapers and other forms of media has increased. Our journalists began using structural and composite methods of

journalism that are commonly used in the west, such as "inverse pyramid" and "unity of intensive movements." This is surely a progressive step in skills of our journalists. Also, the number of useful and active information is rising. These are the evidences that the new trends, which

are often seen in the practice of world free press, are penetrating into our journalism.

It is worth to note here that several big steps were done in the past to establish a legal environment of free press. In 1987, the Board to Control Media was abolished and the content of publication and broadcast wasn't censored anymore. In 1992, "The Rules to Run Media" was changed and it became easier to run media. These changes had a very important role in making media more independent. "Freedom of Press and

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Information Act" was passed in 1998 and started to be followed from January of 1999. Thus, free press became a reality in Mongolia. Although this law has few provisions and wasn't able to solve many problems connected to the legal regulation of media, it is very significant in a way that it forbade to censor the content of public information, to establish organizations that put censorship, to finance such organizations and the governmental institutions to have any forms of media. In 2000, the UN Committee of Human Rights discussed the presentation of the Mongolian Government about the "Implementation of Civil and Political Rights Pact" and wrote in their conclusion: "We are very pleased that Mongolia passed a law about freedom of press."

All these factors caused media to compete for information and improved the content, style, appearance and writing methods of newspapers and other publications apparently. The results of our several surveys conducted among the audience prove the statement above. In 2003, within the project "Formation of Free Press and Public Opinion," we conducted a social survey among 700 people from both the countryside and the city. According to the results, 54 percent of the participants (378 people) answered that the base of free press has formed in Mongolia, 27 percent (188 people) answered that free press is developing quite well and only 1 percent answered that there is no free press at all. Also, 10.3 percent of the

participants believed that our media and journalists are influencing in solving the social and political problems and 83.6 percent thought that they are influencing on some problems.

There are not only such positive phenomena and trends in our journalism, but also negative phenomena that might become obstacles to the development of free press. In the beginning of the 1990s, the independence of media became a real fact and free press was formed. In one hand, it was a destined change occurred in our society but on the other hand, many mechanical changes were introduced to regulate the functions of free press. In other words, the second of the four theories of media, libertarian theory or the complete freedom of media penetrated into the practice of our journalism in a very short time. This event was followed by a number of negative consequences.

The number of media, which was below 100, exceeded 2000 very quickly. Lots of newspapers, radios and televisions with various topics and tendencies have appeared. Many nonprofessionals have entered the field of journalism. As a result, professional journalism became the journalism of amateurs. The skills and variety of broadcast and publication became poor. All kinds of control not only on the content, but also on the composition, grammars and appearance have been abolished. Poor comprehension of both the journalists and the audience about free press affected the

emergence of "ultimate free press" instead of just free press. Media became a tool to accuse, insult, look for profit, achieve reputation, take revenge, overstep in others' private life and pursue gossips. The journalists started to violate the following principles rudely: "To respect the truth and the rights of the people who want to know the truth is one of the first responsibilities of a journalist" as described in "Ethical Principles of Journalists" of the International Association of Journalists; and "To make detailed analysis, to correct the mistakes and to verify the data before publishing an article" as written in the "Ten Commandments of Free Press." All these shortcomings made the journalists to disobey the professional ethics in each of their steps and to forget their social responsibilities. Furthermore, the journalists have lost their reputation among the public and journalism has lost its value. The researchers of journalism say, "The level of the journalists' professional ethics has fallen down dramatically; their reputation is not much better than that of the criminals who kill and steal; and journalists sell their only weapon – pen and their only property – intelligence." Not only professional researchers of journalism, but also ordinary people admit this. Our sociological survey, "The Formation of Free Press and Public Opinion," conducted in 2003 among the audience also proves this comprehension. 81.3 percent of the participants said that Mongolian journalists violate the ethical norms somehow. If to clarify, 29 percent of

all the participants in the survey graded our journalists as "bad." This is a fact to worry for a small and scarcely populated country like Mongolia.

This abnormal phenomenon occurred in our journalism annoyed the politicians and the public. Therefore, it became necessary to take reactive measures, which, in turn, caused unfavorable consequences to the journalists' job. They were the new provisions added to Mongolian Criminal and Civil Codes. It became legally required to arrest, fine or deprive the rights to work, when a journalist accused or insulted someone without any reasons. So far, two female journalists have been punished according to these provisions. Today, many journalists and professional organizations of journalists are making requests to the government to change these provisions but there is still no result.

According to the survey conducted by a non-governmental organization, "Globe International," 178 civil cases and 9 criminal cases about rehabilitation due to the materials spread by the media were settled at the court between 2001 and 2006. Although these cases take a relatively small percentage among all the civil and criminal cases settled by the court, they make up quite a large percentage if to compare them to the time elapsed and to the number of all the media in our country. For 146 of the 178 civil cases against reputation, the court decided that the journalists and the media insulted others' reputation and called as

defendants. Moreover, journalists were connected to 5 of 9 cases about rehabilitation. If to classify the individuals (plaintiffs) who brought cases to the court, politicians were 27 percent, government officials were 10 percent, governmental organizations were 4 percent, businessmen were 21 percent, artists and sportsmen were 12 percent and others made up the remaining 26 percent. One fact that takes our attention is that the media could not prove the trueness of the news and materials they published and broadcasted in 59.6 percent of all the cases settled by the court. From here, we can make up the following conclusions:

- The media pays a little attention to the trueness of the materials they are publishing and broadcasting and does not supervise them carefully. This irresponsibility causes serious legal and ethical mistakes.

- Journalists do not realize what kind of negative consequences unreal information can bring and do not think that they have to be responsible before the law. In other words, our journalists lack legal knowledge.

Mongolian journalists often say that there is no complete legal environment to develop media and there is high pressure from the government. However, we – the researchers of journalism – think the legal environment of media is not very bad. The problem is that the journalists do not enjoy their freedom and opportunities correctly, do not realize

their responsibilities, and do not follow the professional ethical norms. Because of these reasons, they are involved in various problems, are called before the court and lose their reputation. We need legal acts to protect the journalists' rights, to make the political information open and accessible, and to conceal the resources of information.

Today the biggest obstacle that worries the audience and the researchers is the poor skills and ethics of the journalists. Most newspapers have only one style, a few genres, several old topics (political arguments, people's private lives, gossips, etc.), and many mechanical, stylistic, and factual mistakes. Before the 1990s, the "Truth" newspaper was the example of correct grammars. But today, you can easily find at least 10 grammatical mistakes from any Mongolian newspaper. There are even more awkward mistakes like switching the names, writing the names of the politicians incorrectly and guessing some of the facts and data. This is an evidence of the complete abolishment of inner control of the editorial offices. It also proves that self-requirements of the journalists are too loose. When media first became independent and a plenty of newspapers appeared, the entrance of many nonprofessionals affected the content, style, and proficiency of broadcast and publication. Our media still hasn't recovered from these shortcomings. Because nonprofessionals did not have the basic knowledge of journalism, they often called

a small writing "news," some questions and answers an "interview," and a composition in which opinions are expressed a "rumination." Even today, most newspapers write mostly these three genres. They do not know how other genres are called and written. On the other hand, they understood the concepts free press and freedom of media wrongly, so they began to write everything they wanted, to exaggerate the facts and even to make up from their minds. Extremely biased views of the journalists disturb the balance of information, confuse the audience and give wrong idea. As a result, the capacity of information has fallen down and useful, active information has decreased. All these factors reduced the number of subscribers and the number of readable, high-quality and enlightening newspapers. A popular Mongolian scholar and writer, Tudev, wrote: "An important economical index of journalists is determined by how they use the spaces of newspaper, magazine and television screen and how they improved the density of radio waves. Pages or spaces of newspaper and magazine should be dedicated to dense and refined things. To write an essay or an interview with the information which can fit in small news, or to fill in the gaps with repeated words and

idle talk is harmful to the journalist himself and to the readers' precious time."

Nowadays, when the value and significance of information are rising, globalization is taking place, people's ability to receive information is widening, and education is improving, the capacity, quality and proficiency of information are getting more and more important. It is clear

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that the quality and proficiency of Mongolian broadcast and publication can't provide the audience's increasing intellectual needs and requirements. Moreover, our media serves and protects groups of people or political powers. When reading the journalists' work, giving lectures and

exchanging opinions, it is visible that their general education is very poor and their ability to enter and feel the authenticity of problems and phenomena is deficient. There are very few broadcasts and publications, which pose problems, criticize acutely, analyze deeply, expose causes and results, and consider openly and pluralistically. Our journalists lack creativity, activity, research, diligence and general knowledge. The audience got almost tired of the journalists' excessive conclusions, predictions, teachings and secret advertisements. Therefore, the following

questions arise: What to do now? How to switch from quantity to quality? What are the ways to reduce the negative phenomena above? Before answering these questions, I would like to bring an example.

A hundred years ago, new journalism was formed in the USA and "yellow press," dedicated to the uneducated lower class, appeared in huge numbers. Such newspapers increased by geometric progress. They had too much freedom and it became an ordinary event to violate the social responsibilities and ethical norms. The public, government and the researchers of journalism were annoyed by this phenomenon and resisted it in various ways. So, the "Committee of Freedom of Press," lead by Hutchins, the president and professor of Chicago University, was established in 1942. They made a deep analysis to the freedom of American press and released their famous paper, "About Responsible and Free Press" (1947). The theory of responsible freedom of journalism, which is widely used around the world today, was based on this paper. The main idea of the theory is that press must be free but its freedom must be limited, responsible to the society, moral and civilized. Due to such an active and creative step, responsible free press was formed in the USA.

The image of current Mongolian journalism reminds the American journalism hundred years from now. It is also time for us to make a substantial step to shape

moral and responsible journalism. In order to solve this problem successfully, it is necessary to solve the following problems first:

1. Although the Association of Mongolian Journalists enacted the "Ethical Principles of Mongolian Journalists" in 2005 and started to follow it, they haven't reached certain results yet. Several such ethical acts were passed in the past, but each time there were no visible results. The main reason is that there is no mechanism to force those principles into practice. Therefore, we need to establish Press Council or Committee of Journalists' Ethics, which are widespread in the West. If such organization appears, journalists can solve any arguments connected to media without turning to judicial powers. On the other hand, it will make the journalists feel the ethical principles and realize their responsibilities. Also, journalistic organizations need to distribute handbooks of rules to the journalists. This is a widespread experience among the world's large organizations and has a great significance on improving the journalists' social responsibilities. In our country, MONTSAME agency put the beginning of such work and released the "Golden Rules of MONTSAME" and the "Handbook of MONTSAME." However, it did not affect other organizations. The power and opportunities of the researchers of journalism, experienced managers and journalists should be used to complete this task.

2. It is necessary to strengthen the self-control of the journalists and the inner control of the editorial offices, and to make the requirements given to new journalists stricter. Carefully checking the mechanical, grammatical, stylistic, factual and contextual mistakes of the articles will improve the quality of broadcast and publication and will prevent the journalists from getting involved into problems. Sometimes the articles are published without any supervision. This becomes the main cause of negative consequences. Before the 1990s, 4-5 people used to read and edit one article. Even if it's impossible to rebuild this system, at least 2-3 people must supervise.

3. There should be systemized, well-organized trainings to improve not only professional, but also social, political, economical and legal knowledge of the journalists. Professional organizations of journalists such as Mongolian Press Institute and the Association of Mongolian Journalists should pay special attention to this matter. Sending the journalists for appointment to foreign countries and organizing exchange of experiences will improve their skills, practice and knowledge. In recent years, the number of colleges and universities that prepare journalists reached 20. In one hand, it's a good thing. But on the other hand, the new graduates do not satisfy modern requirements because of low education, insufficient number of teachers and poor material supply of today's colleges. We need to

improve the journalistic education, update the academic curriculum, train the teachers and raise the admissions requirements. We know from our experience that good journalists are born when we accept those who are truly interested in journalism or who have natural talents. There will not be any good journalists when we accept anyone who wants to enter. Without changing this system, it is ridiculous to talk about moral and responsible journalism.

4. One of the main factors of the development of journalism is research and critique. It is impossible to improve the quality and efficiency of broadcast and publication, and the ethics and responsibilities of the journalists without prospering theoretical thoughts, giving comments to the trends of development, concluding the journalists' achievements and shortcomings and forming the ability to accept criticisms honestly. Although our journalism has seen much prosperity and the numbers of professional textbooks, research papers and researchers of journalism have increased in recent years, we need to develop the critique of journalism, unite the researchers' power, conduct a large research and launch projects involving the important questions. Especially, our critique of journalism is in a dormant state. That is because the researchers do not have enough effort and creativity; also journalists do not have the ability to accept honest criticisms and prudent comments and the conscience to find out and correct their

own mistakes. It is quite common that they lose their reputation by defending themselves, resisting criticisms, attacking the researchers and taking revenges.

5 ■ In order to form and develop free press, favorable legal environment is necessary like air and water. A favorable legal environment of free press hasn't completely formed yet in our country. Not only the journalists, but also the lawyers and the researchers of journalism admit this. Mongolian laws are mostly dedicated not to protect free press but to protect the reputation of individuals and legal entities. Legislators did not consider that freedom of press and liberty of the public to receive information would be broached in a democratic society. Therefore, it is now important to update some laws, to verify the journalists' rights to achieve information, to confirm the rights to conceal and protect the sources of information if necessary, and to ease the mechanisms to run a form of media. It is also crucial to pay attention to the financial state of free press. According to the survey conducted by the "Globe International" non-governmental organization, 40 percent of the televisions, 31 percent of the radio stations, the same

percent of the newspapers of our country experienced loss in 2004. This survey proves that the financial state of our media is very difficult. Therefore, free press will prosper if the taxes for media are reduced and imported machines, papers and other materials used in press factories are exempted from taxes.

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