

## Mindful journalism and news ethics in the digital era: a Buddhist approach



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BOOK REVIEW

Mindful journalism and news ethics in the digital era: a Buddhist approach, edited by Shelton A. Gunaratne, Mark Pearson and Sugath Senarath, New York, Routledge, 2015, 252 pp., \$98.97 (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-1138852723

‘Mindful journalism’ is all about offering an ‘alternative paradigm’ of media ethics to ‘dominant paradigm’ for practicing journalists/media academics through a holistic approach that Buddha laid down for mankind 2500 years ago. Predicated on conditioning one’s own mind, ‘mindful journalism’ draws its principles of universality and ethical anchoring from the Buddhist philosophy and phenomenology. As everyone is aware, Buddhism is both a way of life as well as a spiritual path.

Having originated in India way back in 4 BC from the ‘enlightenment’ experienced by Goutam Buddha (whose original name was Siddardh, the only son of King Suddhodhan), Buddhism spread in entire Asia and parts of the Pacific. Millions of people in this region still practice Buddhism alongside Daoism and Confucianism. It is the principles (Noble Eightfold Path, also known as ‘Middle Path’) involved in the Buddhist’s (a believer in Buddhism) life that are of importance to the journalistic practice and communication. It is this part of Buddhist approach that this book strives to typify as an ‘alternative paradigm’ to media ethics to rescue Oriental journalism from the ‘Orientalist’ model of the West (Said, 1978/1994).

Three reputed media academics – Gunaratne, Pearson and Senarath – contributed and edited the book – Mindful journalism. The lead editor Gunaratne is one of the strong protagonists of developing an ‘alternative paradigm’ to the Western ‘dominant paradigm’, which feigns to act as a ‘socio-economic-cultural’ model coupled with Eurocentric scientism and Enlightenment. At the same time, there is no denial of the influence of Judeo-Christian tenets on the currently practiced media ethics in the West

(Pearson, 2015). However, by separating church and the state in the west, the Judeo-Christian values became increasingly secularized with a heavy emphasis on individualism/atomism (self) as reflected in Weber's concept of Protestant ethics, says Gunaratne (2015). When this is so, why to exclude a much more secular, positive and balanced Buddhist approach to media ethics and practices, argues Pearson (2015). Later, he (2013) gave the title 'mindful journalism' to this groundbreaking work.

This book not only backgrounds the critique of the prevailing Western-centric media ethics and practices but also demonstrates with evidence how 'mindful journalism' restores the lost professional standards through purification of an individual's mind. Expanding on the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, Gunaratne deftly extracts and relates the 15 sacred principles of Buddhist phenomenology to the journalistic profession (p. 10). The aim of such an effort is to relieve the 'suffering' of people by 'self-restrained' reporting as opposed to the present practice of reporting which regards 'information or news' as a 'commodity' and the reader as a 'consumer'. In the process it aspires to bring harmony among all the stakeholders – media, government and people – and reduce the 'suffering' of mankind.

Divided into 11 chapters, Gunaratne has written 4 chapters. He also wrote an excursus for the chapter of Patchanee Malkhao and Jan Servaes – The Journalism as Changing Agent. While Malkhao and Servaes, Asanga Tilakaratne, Sugath Senarath and Kalinga Seneviratne had written one chapter each, Mark Pearson has penned two chapters, one himself alone and another with Sugath Senarath. However, all the three had together written the concluding chapter in which they have frankly discussed the merits and demerits of their work, and even effectively countered the critique that the work seems to be more 'utopian'. This is the significant feature of this book not commonly found in the texts of other authors. Gunaratne himself has offered the details of each chapter as a synopsis in the chapter of 'Introduction' under the head – About This Book and, hence, there is no need to replicate the same here.

Detailed descriptions of Four Noble Truths as explained in the book in terms of Pali language together with their English renditions are beyond the scope of this short review. However, the way the authors drew the comparisons between the current manners of news reporting and how mindful journalism could offset its shortcomings at relevant chapters is another significant feature of this text. In fact, the first of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism refers to dukkha (grief/suffering/dissatisfaction). Gunaratne illustrates this in chapter one by drawing comparisons with the news items published in newspapers in the US. Using the analysis of the news paradigm developed by Hoyer (2005) and news values formulated by Mencher (2006), Gunaratne demonstrates the differences between the negative facets of Western news and positive facets of mindful journalism.

The second chapter delves into the importance of 'lack of self' (anatta) for a mindful journalist. In other words, he/she has to prefer a mid-path between the two extremes (absolute and conventional) of a truth/fact while reporting/writing. In doing so, a journalist will minimize the reliance/emphasis on 'individual' or his/her grief. Indeed, anyone who watches media today faces a bewildering question – what is the need to give wide publicity to an individual suffering, irrespective of the reasons/causes for the suffering? Another question that stares into our face is what happens to human privacy, which is most precious, as much as an individual's freedom of expression? Citing examples from US media (pp. 46–47), Gunaratne explains how media should

focus on larger matters of community's interest, not vice versa. Mindful journalism reverses this trend as it advocates positive reporting and treats news as a social good. Patchanee Malkhao and Jan Servaes assay the virtues of a journalist turning into a changing agent. A journalist who does not embrace for a change will perpetuate 'self', a false identity, thereby allowing idiosyncrasy as well. Mindful journalism calls for awakening to this fact that 'change is incessant and continuous' (anicca) and there is nothing permanent in the world (p. 58). They explained how the causal links in the Buddhadasa model (as adopted in Thailand) led to 'dependent co-origination' (paticca samuppada). Such an understanding of the inconstancy/impermanency will automatically lead society from conflict to harmony, explains Gunaratne in excursus. He draws comparisons between Buddhism and Bhagavad Gita to underpin his analysis (p. 69).

In the fourth chapter Gunaratne offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for 'dependent co-origination' (PS model) relating it to the journalistic practices. Anchoring on this, he enunciates 12 interdependent causal factors (nidanas) that interactively condition the level of each sentient being's suffering. He explains how a journalist who understands this helps media to end a 'conflict' and promote 'peace/harmony'. In the fifth chapter, he further explains how Buddhism, backed by Daoism, supports the journalist to adhere to the principles of naturalness or spontaneity (ziran) to achieve the 'Pooh-Way'. Thus, this chapter lays foundation for environmental journalism and how to report 'nature' as a 'process'. The mindful journalism does not treat the 'news' as a commodity. Asanga Tilakaratne, in chapter six, looks upon 'consumption of news' as a means for human well-being. Excessive consumption of 'news' that today's permissive economy of communication allows is highly 'detrimental' to the well-being of a human being. In other words, he discourages promotion of anger, greed, conflict, lust, etc. through the unlimited consumption of 'news about suffering' (crime, rape, seduction, kidnap, murder, extortion, etc.).

In chapter seven, Sugath Seranath attempts to derive a secular concept of the middle path by subsuming all the Four Noble Truths. Drawing parallels with Aristotle's Golden Mean as well as the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, he suggests to a journalist to desist from airing extreme views. Mark Pearson and Sugath Seranath's chapter dealing with right speech, right action and right livelihood indeed offered new vistas for revisitation of existing media ethics. They viewed that these three are interdependent, leading the journalist to an ethical conduct/practice.

Mark Pearson also opines that journalistic task 'requires a considerable effort at accomplishing the techniques of reflection-in-action' and calls for a systematic mental cultivation by adopting right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (p. 163). Kalinga Seneviratne exhorts that the current state of global journalism can reshape itself into a more wholesome enterprise if it accepts and applies the Buddhist concept of 'wisdom' encompassing Right Thought and Right View. He also says that these are the areas where mindful (vipassana) journalism and mainstream (Western) journalism could work together (p. 179). In the concluding chapter, all the three authors once again endeavor to substantiate and reiterate why they conceived the 'Buddhist approach' as ideal for journalistic practices. In short, mindful journalism offers a moral compass which Western media ethics/journalistic practices failed to offer. In that sense, they view that an aspiring mindful journalist must go

through a rigor of mental development through a process of meditation which will enable him/her to form appropriate frames for reporting (p. 201).

In fact the authors deserve many compliments for bringing out such a unified and exemplary alternative paradigm that is useful for both media academics and practitioners across the globe. Further, academics do well by prescribing this as a text as part of the curriculum of media ethics and practices in all the universities. In fact such an exercise will facilitate a broader debate and rethinking among the stakeholders on the need to revise or revisit the existing obsolescent and negative-centric media ethics and practices.

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