Ethical Tasks of Media Advocacy in the 21st Century

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Citing UNESCO´s recent finding regarding children, the discussion focuses on the *forms of exclusion* impacting civil society worldwide and the future generations. With its enormous economic and scientific progress, how is it that today´s *knowledge society* excludes values of wisdom and moral progress? Are not the guiding principles for participation in social change, for human development and for policy framework for prioritizing investment in scientific knowledge production conspicuous by their absence? Quite alarming as the scenario sounds, it should wake us up to the darkest areas of *human condition,* which must be interrogated by asking: What are *its* most challenging frontiers today? How strategically and innovatively can ethics and the media address the most urgent issues the humanity is confronted by? It is in this context that I argue for *media advocacy* as a philosophy of participation for impacting the possible directions for policy change.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, how would have Ludwig Wittgenstein responded to a big change overtaking the main actors in our world which is so highly globalized? As the lives of citizens and civil society worldwide have been increasingly governed by the environment created by the corporate world of industry, business interests, market forces and the race for competitive, if not cleaner, technologies, hitherto unsuspected questions about meaningful stakeholder participation, human rights, justice, transparency, cultural values, health issues and policy change raise their heads in increasingly newer contexts. Being under their overwhelming influence, as we all are, how are such paradigms of governance to be interrogated? If we talk to the leaders of the corporate world in any part of the world, we would learn how much excitement there is over the prospect of *knowledge society* replacing (or having replaced) the industrial society. In their world-view, there is a paradigm shift taking place. The companies, organizations, educational institutions and the state are entering a new engagement with values and people. The lesson to be drawn is that, while chalking out new strategies of business promotion, they should take care of intangibles, such as information and cultural values, where previously all attention was focused on the tangibles exclusively.

But the world we have created, *if not inherited*, is a world where we think and act in a manner as if we were governed by *an undeclared emergency* with our fingers always on the access button: *have access, if you can pay*. In a big way, this brings the tangibles back in. Don´t we live in a world where *the state of emergency* has become the paradigm of governance as it tries to cope with the global and local contexts of structural violence, terrorism, retreat of the state, institutional breakdown, uprootment of threatened communities, mass extinction of species and climate change? We must not forget that *the state of emergency* is not a positive state. It is a negative state of the retreating state and its complicated mechanisms of governance (Strange 1998, Stevis, D. et al 2001). How can the world cope with such a negative state? In such a world, does science with or without wisdom have a future? This question deserves serious attention of every thinking person, including those who believe in a totalitarian take-over by *knowledge society* based on science and technology on the one hand and the rules of the game called globalization on the other. More than the scientists themselves, is it not the state and its bureaucracy of funding mechanisms, its ever-growing nexus with industry and military and the corresponding institutional incentives for career-oriented scientists, which are in-charge of science and scientific knowledge production, its institutions and technologies (Saxena, R. K. et al 2005a)? The thesis which I propose to put forth has *media advocacy for moral progress* for its key concept. Most of the media advocacy scholarship which has emerged recently focuses, quite legitimately, on public health, public health goals and strategies for policy change and on health campaigns as part of health promotion. Taking a clue from (Wallack, L. et al 1993: pp.vii-xiii, 1-11, 25, 200-208) and building upon (Pandit 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007), I argue that the concept and practice of media advocacy can be legitimately *extended* to *the frontier of all the frontiers, namely ethics in the public domain* (Pandit 2007). Think of the following ethical tasks which demand urgent attention of every community and every thinking person: (i) defending human life and dignity particularly at the interface between the basic and applied science (ii) debating climate change mitigation and adaptation and (iii) impacting policy change for improving the human condition of governance and stakeholder participation.

1. Industry, Science, Business and Policy.

Does science have a sub-text within its sub-culture which rarely surfaces in scientific practice or in discussions on science? The answer is yes, if with Nicholas Maxwell (2004) we want to admit that “The crisis of our times is that we have science without wisdom”. There are powerful arguments amidst increasing evidence in favour of the view that a sub-culture in the culture of science exists with a sub-text which is neither made public nor debated openly. Where science itself suppresses its sub-text and sub-culture *and* the underlying aims, values, priorities, beliefs and ambitions, it is neurotic (Maxwell 2004: ix-xv; 83-99). On the contrary, where it practices transparency in the public domain it is not neurotic (Maxwell 2004: 83-99). What is worse is that the society which regards itself as a *knowledge society* is deeply caught in *the rituals of knowledge production.* It seeks to apply science in every conceivable manner in varied fields of human activity and cultural life, which are known to impact the very environments which, with their wonderful ecosystem services, nurture and sustain Earth and us. The question is whether it is not this sub-culture with a sub-text which facilitates a dogmatic extension of the scientists´ freedom of research to the varied applications of science. Ideally, every such extended freedom should be thrown open to debate and criticism before the potential applications of science can be pursued with wisdom. Who is not familiar with scientists and technocrats engaged, *neurotically as it were*, in building not just the utopian blue-prints but totalitarian schemes for changing the world beyond recognition? But how do they manage to extend the universal freedom of scientific research to all imaginable/possible applications of science including its grave misuses with such ease? No one questions their illegitimacy in doing so. Those whose fingers are always at the access button are not expected to do so. It

can be argued that the primary reason for this kind of tolerance, slowly leading to general acceptance, is the absence of a culture in which the scientists themselves would spare no effort to debate their sub-culture and its subtexts, openly and critically. Its absence leaves us only with *the rituals of knowledge society*. No surprise, if mankind lands itself every time in knowledge production without that wisdom which ought to inform its varied applications. Biotechnology, bio-medical research and other fields of science provide spectacular examples of this human condition of knowledge production (Lanctöt 2002, Pandit 2006c, 2007).

The question is whether the applications of science that are being pursued worldwide really do fulfil ethical scrutiny through public debate. Invariably, the answer is in the negative, so long as there is no universal agreement on which ethical regulations to follow in which context for such scrutiny (Pandit 2007). Yet we must ask whether we can think of a world which is guided by the policies and values of pursuing moral progress along side scientific, economic and technological progress. Since moral progress and scientific progress can never be synonymous, these need to be debated publicly. More precisely stated, in no case can the criteria of moral progress come from science itself, since they have no roots in it. Therefore, instead of allowing them to pass as if they were part of its sub-text, they need to be debated openly. Although it is true that the state and private funding of scientific research does not come without its conditions, the freedom of research enjoyed by the scientists worldwide can neither dogmatically nor automatically be transferred to all imaginable applications of science. On the contrary, potential applications need public debate before crucial policy decisions to pursue them can be made. This raises a further question how we might identify the primary indicators of the biggest failure of mankind: The failure of pursuing *knowledge production without the values of wisdom*. We may also call it the failure of pursuing scientific, economic and technological progress *without* the values of moral progress. Among the primary indicators, consider the following:

(i) The world which mankind has inherited from the past century is a world divided against itself everywhere and in all spheres of human activity, most notably on the issue of which values to accept as universally binding in defence of human life and dignity; we are a witness to institutional breakdown which is taking a heavy toll universally.

(ii) Quite characteristically, our world creates technologies which repeat this conflict and raise the following paradox: There are people who may be in dire need of these technologies. But they have no access to them. And there are people who may not need them. Yet they want to have them because they can pay for them.

(iii) Add to this the fact that it is the nexus between the state, industry and military which determines the environment for *investment* on new technologies. But there is hardly any investment on *research* on *access to new technologies* (ANT), which is commensurate with such investment. As a result, new technologies arrive in our world even before the old technologies become accessible to people who need them.

The indicators (i-iii) unambiguously point to the following paradox of ANT. ANT cannot be defined in terms of a person´s capacity to pay for it, particularly within the *knowledge society.* But until now ANT has been taken to mean the capacity to pay. What is worse is that in the field of biomedical research on assisted re-productive technologies, it is generally taken to mean both one´s *capacity* to pay and *willingness* to become a part of an extended laboratory for carrying out experiments on human subjects, in absence of any *informed access* (Pandit 2007). Pregnant with far-reaching ethical implications and linkages, both *informed access* and *informed consent* depend upon ethical consultation service in diverse contexts. So long as people have no *informed access* in this standard sense, they would be incapable of any *informed consent*. In fact, it is true that most people have no ANT in the standard sense. If this is so, it implies that recording their *informed consent* in such experiments *ritualistically* makes no sense. Imagine the situation, if these are the same people who have no access even to the old technologies. Is this not paradoxical enough to warrant a preliminary explanation? At least a part of the explanation may come from the absence of debate on the complicated nexus between the state, industry and scientific institutions in terms of (i-iii), signalling absence of debate on *the sub-text of science*. Now, consider the following questions (to be discussed in §2 below), which our discussion raises at a deeper level: Divided against itself, is our world really getting closer and closer to becoming a *knowledge society*? How can we guard ourselves against new forms of totalitarianism which may not be visible to every one? How strategically should the real stakeholders think and act in order to impact participation, improvement of human condition, policy change and governance, when the world is caught in globalization and in *the rituals of knowledge society*, old as well as new? If the modes of scientific knowledge production are themselves in crises, is there a way forward for humanity where it would be guided by the values of wisdom and moral progress?

2. Beyond the Rituals of Knowledge Society.

A window to viewing what state *the knowledge society* has landed itself in is provided by the state of children´s human condition in the majority of economically advanced nations of the world. Any question in this regard may sound intriguing enough in the context of the recent human development initiatives at the highest level, notably the UN Millenium Development Goals (UNMDGs). The UNMDGs primarily address the poorer nations of the world. The initiative has attracted inadequate support from the developed nations, although all 192 members of the UNO have agreed to it. Interestingly enough, our picture of the state of children´s human condition worldwide gets far more clouded than one would have expected as soon as we shift our attention to the context of the most advanced nations of the world. A more recent finding of the United Nations Children´s Fund is highly disturbing (UNICEF report, February 14, 2007). It brings together the best of the currently available data in its *Report Card 7, Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries,* providing an overview of the state of childhood in the majority of economically advanced nations of the world. The finding about the quality of life of children in the rich countries as against the poorer countries is not new. Who is not familiar with the global phenomenon of child poverty amidst a great diversity of *forms of exclusion* worldwide? What is *new* is that the report *for the first time* measures and compares overall child well-being across six dimensions: material well-being, health and safety, education, peer and family relationships, behaviours and risks, and young people's own subjective sense of their own well-being. In total, 40 separate indicators of child well-being – from relative poverty and child safety, to educa-

tional achievement to drug abuse – are brought together in this overview to present a picture of the lives of children. In the report, Britain has been identified as the worst industrialised country for children. By using 40 indicators to gauge the lives of children in 21 economically advanced nations -- the first study of its kind -- researchers found that Britain's children were among the poorest and most neglected. Britain lagged behind on key measures of poverty and deprivation, happiness, relationships, and risky or bad behaviour. It scored a little better for education but languished in the bottom third for all other measures, giving it the lowest overall placing, along with the United States. Children's happiness was rated highest in northern Europe, with the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark leading the list. UNICEF UK's executive director David Bull declared that "All countries have weaknesses that need to be addressed and no country features in the top third of the rankings for all six dimensions".

More significantly, the study found that there was no consistent relationship between a country's wealth, as measured in gross domestic product per capita, and a child's quality of life. The finding is certainly disturbing in more than one sense. It reveals the disturbing fact that there is a *negative correlation* between a developed country´s wealth and children´s quality of life. If this is so, then it follows that the child poverty in poorer and developing countries has little to with the poverty of these countries. *What about the wise allocation of funds for wise investment on children´s well-being, their universal access to basic services in education, health, nutrition, shelter, come what may?* Irrespective of how rich or poor a country is, there could be uncompromising ways and means of ensuring high quality of children´s life. Think of a poorer family which sends their child to school because they believe quite wisely that educating the child will give it dignity and pave for a better life. A richer family, with a different set of beliefs, may end up sending the child to work. Does not this warrant another look at children´s well-being, more so if we want to be guided by the values of wisdom and moral progress? Does it depend, *first*, on the kind of values that are fostered by the state and its complicated mechanisms and, *then*, on the kind of values that are followed by the individuals, by the family and civil society in their actual organization of economic, cultural and intellectual life? I think that it is possible to argue for an answer in the affirmative. As I have shown, out of this situation, there arise deeper questions across many disciplines:

(1*) First*, how are we to interpret this finding regarding children in *ethical terms*?

(2) *Secondly*, how is it possible for us to act as stakeholders, particularly on behalf of children, with an empowering voice in an *information society,* particularly under the present situation?

(3)*Thirdly*, how does this finding impact the very formulation of the UNMDGs which are primarily addressed to the poorer countries of the world?

The questions (1-2) can be raised regarding any generalization we may arrive at in the context of civil society as a whole and the future generations. These questions will go on multiplying as we identify the issues of policy planning, decision-making and enforcement mechanisms and their contexts that cry for public debate. For example, think of the state of public health and public health policies worldwide (Wallack *et al* 1993), or rampant medical malpractices, the crucial yet unfulfilled role of ethics consultation service in biomedical research, informed ANT (Pandit 2007), sustainable development and climate change and so on and so forth. The question (3) concerns the following UNMDGs:

(1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) Achieve universal primary education; (3) Promote gender equality and empower women; (4) Reduce child mortality; (5) Improve maternal health; (6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria & other diseases; (7) Ensure environmental sustainability; (8) Promote global partnership for development.

Do they need another look now in view of the UNICEF report (February 14, 2007)? The answer is in the affirmative. But its discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.1. Media Advocacy for Impacting Policy Change.

We have briefly considered the question whether *informed consent* ritualistically taken from potential human subjects of experiments in biomedical research makes sense without *informed access* to new technologies/experimental procedures that promise solutions to their potential beneficiaries (Pandit 2007). How muddled and toothless are the ethical guidelines presently being followed in some countries in this context? We must now ask why everywhere in our world, individuals and whole communities, confronted by the challenges of alienation and caught in diverse forms of exclusion and deprivation, are prevented from *being as they would like to be*. Torn apart, they are deprived of spaces of participation and universal interconnectedness, culturally, ecologically, economically, morally and politically (Pandit 2001b, 2006a). Finally, the universality of the crises of *scientific knowledge production without the values of wisdom and moral progress* shows itself in *the rituals of knowledge society* which are supported and maintained by the state bureaucracies worldwide. It also shows itself in those forms of exclusion which proliferate with economic, scientific and technological progress. One of the most disturbing questions at the frontier of media advocacy is: Why do *media* themselves fail in fulfilling their normal ethical tasks, confronted as we are with such a situation?

Let us now consider the following set of questions: Which are the most challenging issues of concern to mankind, to civil society and to whole communities as *potential media advocates*? What are the frontiers, in defence of human life and dignity, which call for innovative and strategic use of media by the real stakeholders? And what are the presuppositions of media advocacy as a strategy of ethics in public domain? To take up the last question first, media advocacy presupposes that media themselves are in need of change in orientation and policy. It also presupposes that the debate on ethical and legal issues of principle can play a decisive role in the public perception of *problems* of stakeholder-participation, policy improvement and change of social-political environments for their proper solutions. Thus, it is a basic presupposition that it is possible to frame fundamental issues regarding human well-being interests, e.g., issues of children´s well-being, of public health, climate change, sustainable development and human rights violations, *differently* from the way in which the state and international institutions frame them *ritualistically*. Seen in this role, it can help in diagnosing a crisis-situation by asking who is to blame, who is accountable and who is it finally whose policies must change. More precisely speaking, the need for real stakeholders to take over media advocacy tasks in larger public and human interest arises where the state and other responsible institutions are in retreat, in breakdown or in a mode of passing the blame to the victims. I think that the best examples are provided by climate change and human rights

campaigns which are *ritualistically* carried out by the governments worldwide under the UNO programmes and guidelines. Whenever individual or collective cases of violation of human rights on massive scale are brought by independent organizations to public attention, the governments, particularly in the developing countries, come out increasingly in favour of huge budgets for investing in talk-shows to spread human rights awareness among the actual and potential victims. Beyond this, the victims, which include the whole communities terrorized by organized terrorists and criminals, are expected to make representations to human rights commissions and employ lawyers to demand from law courts not only justice but the restoration of dignity, of which they have been robbed. What is worse in this scenario of governance is the state-sponsored terrorism in many parts of the world (Pandit 2005, 2006b). And think of those innocent communities who have been made its victims, robbing their members of their dignity and freedom. Today their very survival depends on the prospects of media advocates taking up the task of highlighting their human condition and formulating proposals for change in the government policy. The main reason for this is that the governments themselves are incapable of exposing the criminality of the retreat of the state and the failure of state mechanisms in preventing the violation of fundamental human rights from taking place. Thus, media advocacy sets the agenda for change and improvement in the human condition by reframing issues of principle where the life and dignity of innocent people are at stake. What is most significant is that it shifts the focus of attention from the *individual frame* to the *environmental frame* by asking the following questions: Has the state created human rights developmental environment which is conducive to the safe-guarding of the life and dignity of ordinary citizens and vulnerable communities (Pandit 2001a)? Has it put in place institutions and enforcement mechanisms which can deliver the most essential services to civil society? Is there proper environment in which civil society can feel safe, secure and meaningfully interconnected? It is clear, then, that media advocacy presupposes a need for social and political change, particularly with regard to paradigms of governance. This includes a need for change in *how* the individuals, societies, the corporate world, the institutional mechanisms of governance, the governments and organizations, both regional and international, have organized themselves into a *knowledge society*. In particular, the most serious ethical task here is how values of wisdom and moral progress might be brought in as the guiding principles of *knowledge society* - as the guiding principles to bear upon public debate on policy issues whenever and wherever human well-being interests are at stake.

Thus, media advocacy entails a holistic approach to diagnosing and solving the issues of policy change. Environmental damage (Barlow, M. et al 2002, Stevis, D. et al 2001) and Climate change provide the most important examples at the regional as well as global level. The question is what should the policies on climate change mitigation and on cleaner technologies look like? Suppose each country were to follow its individual path for framing problems of climate change and finding solutions to them. Then we would be in a situation in which one could, blaming others, always argue that only those who pollute more should pay the price: “The polluter pays doctrine”. There would be then no (need for) public debate at global and universal level. But the moment we universalize the problem of climate change, it invites media advocacy for impacting change in policy. As a matter of fact, media advocacy during the recent decades has played a crucial part in framing the issues of policy differently. It has brought science, technology, politics, governance and international relations under one umbrella (e.g., the Kyoto Protocol, in place till 2012, asks the developed countries to promote less carbon intensive technological developments). The role of media advocacy assumes crucial significance the moment the developing countries argue that the developed nations must share a greater responsibility for cuts in the greenhouse gas emissions, since they are to blame for climate change by emitting 10 times, in some cases by 8.5 times, more carbon dioxide between 1950-2003. By this logic, the developing nations should be allowed to develop and industrialize now by any means to any extent while sharing a lesser responsibility. If it finally depends on how the major *players* in the game choose to frame the problem of climate change and environmental damage, media advocacy by the stakeholders assumes crucial importance.

Is there then a way forward for humanity? The discussion above anticipates a crucial role for ethics and media advocacy. To answer the question what is media advocacy and who are the media advocates, much depends upon what is at stake, which problem-areas we are interested in and which paradigms we want to change. Consider a minority community in a civil society, which feels *excluded* and impoverished through the policies of the government of day. As a stakeholder wanting a change in the environment and policies of the government, industry and other responsible institutions, it could participate for impacting change in the necessary direction by using the media innovatively and strategically. With strategic access to the media, it could voice its concerns, highlight its problems and their possible solutions, promote the quality of public debate on issues of principle and influence changes in public policy and planning in the most desirable directions. *A move in media advocacy in this sense would entail a philosophically significant step in ethics in public domain. The best way to understand media advocacy as a philosophy of participation for impacting change is to consider it as part of individual and community initiatives to bring debates on issues of concern to civil society and mankind into the public domain*. Once it is so re-connected, it can be understood as “a significant force for influencing public debate and putting pressure on policymakers” (Wallack, L. *et al* 1993). Media advocacy entails a participatory *role* for whole communities either as stakeholders in their own right or on behalf of real stakeholders who have no voice. The innovative and strategic use of media by the real stakeholders changes not only the volume but the quality of advocacy on specific issues of common concern to civil society and to mankind. As they are heard interrogating the paradigms of governance, policies on quality of life and environment, the whole communities with least resources and rare access to centres of power and authority, and the values they uphold, become visible and effective in bringing about desirable change in the environment through policy change. An effective and innovative use of media to this end is not possible unless the media themselves assume the role of a stakeholder and the whole communities themselves take to *media advocacy* as a strategy of social change.

To sum up: *Media advocacy* does not merely refer to effective and responsible coverage of issues or events by the media. It goes beyond awareness campaigns aimed at informing or educating the individuals and public about issues of common concern. It has nothing to do with lobbying and lying through paid advertisements, the seemingly prime movers of news media in today´s *knowledge society*. For these often act as obstacles to debating and framing sound public policies on fundamental issues of public health, quality of life, clean technologies, and sustainable and clean energy sources. *Media advocacy* becomes im-

perative where our gaol is (i) to influence changes in policy to promote educational, social, political and environmental development; (iii) to focus public debate on policy makers and corporate executives whose decisions structure the environment in which policies affecting the quality of life of people are framed; and (iv) to enable whole communities which feel *excluded* or *threatened* to participate for impacting policy change in desirable directions. The most fundamental ethical task of *media advocacy* is then the innovative and strategic use of media to bring the stakeholder-perspective to bear upon problem-perception, policy–framework and decision-making as issues of deep concern to civil society and mankind. Therefore, the motto of the media advocate should be: *participate and re-connect in order to improve the human condition*.

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