

## **Media and Public Morality**

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From their very inception media have been subject to rigorous scrutiny especially by the self assumed moral watchdogs or traditional institutions that take leadership in the area of ethics and morals. It is a documented fact that almost all media encountered a negative reception when they were first invented partly because of fear of their consequences and partly because of ignorance on the part of the public regarding media's direction and scope. Often anything radically new incites ambiguous reactions: either it is loved because it is fresh coming with some new perspectives or it is rejected because it intimidates and perceived as violating traditionally held mores and thoughts. When print media took the medieval Europe by storm the Church was apprehensive, to a large extent justifiably so, because of the concern over the content of much publication then. The medieval Church took an indifferent stance putting a large amount of printed materials in the index citing that they were harmful to faith. The first movies that came out of the nascent cinema labs in France or in the U.S drew fire from the moral groups from both sides of the Atlantic because much of their content was considered downright filthy that degraded family and marriage. That pessimism and angry uproar against media content continues unabated to this day in many different forms keeping the question of media morality alive and going.

Let us begin our inquiry with certain trite questions regarding the content and nature of the media: What are the media? What in their nature that at the same time excites the imagination and invites criticism of the public?

What could be efficient measurements to evaluate the moral questions that are generated by media programming? Would it be possible to chart out the profile of responsible media in the modern world? Some of these above inquiries reflect the nature of media, some others the content of media, whereas others deal with the evaluation of media.

### **Certain Theoretical Considerations**

From the turn of the twentieth century there have been a lot of research on the nature and effects of media in the public square (Steven, 2004; Sherry, 1998; Gentry, 1997; Phelan, 1980; Katz, 1957, 2001; Lazarsfeld, 1940). Most of such research on media effects was based on the assumption that media are instruments that help transfer of messages from one point to another using certain channel with the view of producing an effect. This effect-oriented research fails to recognize a large number of variables that affect the efficiency of media such as the psychological structure of participants, the nature of channels, their socio cultural context, and the continued nature of interaction based on feedback. Much of advertising industry believe in this theory of effects where media have been considered as instruments to sell soaps, opinions, and ideas to the public. Often it is market revenue that determines the quality and content of mediated communication.

Much of advertising and propaganda media was based on the psychology of the audience that becomes vulnerable at the continued onslaught of repeated messages (Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Sherry, 1998). It attacks the innate desire of human person to succeed, to be counted as somebody in an indifferent environment, and to satisfy one's need for self worth. It was theorized that media helped satisfy these natural desires in the human beings and therefore they were mere instruments that facilitated certain social and personal function. In this functional approach media seem to concentrate on human inadequacies and fear over success and self-esteem but end up promoting more fear, insecurity, and failure.

There is another approach which is disillusioned by the way media are used by hegemonic power blocks such as business and politics in order to persuade and manipulate people to suite their vested interests. This approach is vary about media effects in individuals, societies, and cultures and investigates how mass media end up creating and modifying consciousness, values, individual identity, and socialization. This critical theory holds that human beings are self-creating producers of their own history and destiny and can transform their own social reality through media (Habermas, 1990; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Gramsci, 1971).

Although the effects theory of media has been much contested in academic research (Gauntlett, D. 2005; Bushman, B. J., & Anderson, C. A. 2001; DeFleur, M. L. 1998), we can observe that there are at least two schools of thought one totally opposed to the other. One school holds that media are cultural constructions and are totally under the power of the one who has in possession a remote control. In this approach media are considered to have no power at all and that the audience has total control over them. If so, much of the sexually deviant and aggressive programming in media gets its spot in broadcast on account of people's choice. The second school maintains media to be all powerful and mighty instruments under whose onslaught, the human being is rendered totally powerless. The innocent human person is assailed by brutal and insensitive media content and therefore media are responsible for all the sham and violence in the society. Whatever school one chooses one assumes certain broad understanding of media regarding their nature and effects.

### **Understanding Media**

The term media refers to many communication technologies such as the press, radio, television, cinema, internet, cell phone, and many others. Second, media are not just instruments to transfer messages but they are physical extensions of human being themselves. Third, media are not technological inventions but cultural interventions in which cultural processes

such as encoding and decoding of messages take place. Fourth, media are not only objective realities but also subjective activities by which the profile of people and their society are constantly constructed and modified.

There is the prevalent notion that media are the offshoot of technical and electronic revolutions that have come to change people's way of thinking, acting, and communicating. However it should be stressed that media revolution began when the individual human animal evolved into a social being. The wayside stone that the primordial human animal used as a weapon to ward off the advances of an enemy or the fire that he or she raised to indicate his or her whereabouts, or the drum he or she beat to declare war - were some of the first media events that were then considered revolutionary. When human beings began to live in groups they first used their body movements and vocal sounds as technologies to facilitate communication with others in and outside the group. These simple technologies helped them adopt to their environments and make sense of their world. When human life became complex and when social and relational pressures became intense human beings were forced to invent devices that would help them to overcome their environment limited by space and time.

In order to overcome environmental limitations of space and time, manifold communication technologies came into being. As needs increased technologies multiplied in order to satisfy those needs and they in time changed not only the human environment but the human beings themselves. As technology changed from being physical to mechanical and then to electric and electronic, communication helped humans to assume a sense of absolute rule over their environment and create alternative environment. The new communication media ushered in new ways of being human and presented many unintended challenges to human social and relational existence. With instantaneous communication from one corner of the globe to another, humans multiplied not only triumphs but also troubles. With the mushrooming of communication technologies there seems more information but less communication more spectacles but little significance.

There is another danger in this mediated culture that one should contend with, that is, of considering media as objective realities extraneous to human beings, a notion that has been vigorously contested by Marshall McLuhan (1964). The popular conception of media that has been held for a long time as instruments that help easier transport of information from one point to another, has to be subjected to evaluation. Media do have an instrumental aspect in them since they do help the implementation of an action that human beings desire to achieve. However, we need to grow out of this notion and embrace media as human, personal, and cultural realities. Media in their inception, nature, and scope are human, that is, they are extensions of human person in that they help extend the reach of the human body and human powers. Through this extended body, the humans not only relate and respond to their social and cultural environment but also create them. The wireless communication of the present has eradicated the limitations that space and time have imposed and extended the potential of the human thought and will. Therefore multiplication of media inventions has assured the extension of human personality and augmented human capacity to reach out to others and create a community based on mediation.

Another argument vital to the understanding of media is that they are integral part of popular culture and that they are as varied as culture (Hall, 1973; Williams, 1963). They originate from culture and once invented they help create culture, that is, media are cultural products that seem to express, explicate, condition, and control the way people live, think, and feel. In the same token media construct popular culture through their system of encoding and decoding. Media programming reduce thought into messages (encoding) and enlarging those messages back into ideas (decoding) within the cultural context. Through their products media become producers of social and cultural realities whereby reduce people to become mere consumers. The cultural studies considers media as political products and seeks to understand the ways in which meaning is generated, disseminated, and produced through

various media practices within socio economic institutions and structures of a given culture. This notion reiterates the perennial question whether it is the society responsible for the structure of media or media is responsible for the way the social structures are mediated.

In this paper we hold that media are social constructs and that they in turn construct social and cultural realities. The work-a-day social realities are being constructed in interaction between media and the human beings (Bruner, 1991; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this dialectic interaction both media as well as human beings are shaped, defined, and modified. Therefore modern media could only be considered as those substrata on which the modern social, cultural, domestic, and relational realities are being formulated, fashioned, and changed or even terminated. If so, not only media but also human beings ought to be held accountable for much of media sponsored aggressive and sexual programming. Therefore society as well as media should be held accountable for what gets into media content and for the safeguarding of public morality.

### **Morality and Ethics**

There is a subtle difference between ethics and morals; whereas ethics deal with a system that explicate social behavior, morals are practical guides to control individual actions in a society under the sanction of punishment. While ethics focus on a social system, morals deal with day to day application of norms in private and social life. In other words, ethics refer to general standards or codes of behavior that are basic to a group to which an individual action belongs. Morality is the actual norms and rules that guide the actions of an individual in public sphere which may or may not depend on an ethical system. Therefore a person can be moral without consciously relating his or her actions to an ethical system. However, in spite of these subtle differences between ethics and morals, both seem to have the same goal of guiding human persons towards what they should do and avoid as individuals and as group. In this paper we use both concepts interchangeably and investigate

into the nature, structure, and actual relationship between media and public morality.

### **Public Morality**

Public morality refers to those written or unwritten norms that are consciously or unconsciously concerned with life of individuals in a community. Frequently public morality strives to ensure quality of life not just the physical good but also the moral good of the individual in public sphere. More often such morality has been linked with the regulation of sexual matters, including obscenity, vulgarity, and prostitution, and matters of conduct such as nudity, pornography, cohabitation before marriage, and the protection of children. Public morality, is concerned with norms and actions focused on the moral conduct of individuals in the public sphere. They may be as varied as issues like polygamy, incest, divorce, drugs, pornography, prostitution, adultery, fornication, contraception, abortion, homosexual acts, suicide, euthanasia, gambling, drunkenness, public vulgarity, public nudity, and so on.

Public morality is concerned with both individual acts and social practices that may hurt the physical and the moral dimensions of people. Christopher Wolf (2000) confirms this using certain examples: An act of abortion inflicts direct physical harm to a nonconsenting human being (the child) and moral harm on those persons who perform it. Pornography may be prohibited not only because it involves moral harm to the persons indulging in it but also undermines the value of marriage and the dignity of the human person. Drugs and alcohol may be prohibited because of the harm done to the persons using them, but it may also be prohibited because the use of drugs might affect personal initiative and productivity.

Tom Hartman (2003) distinguishes public morality from private morality as that conduct in which larger social issues such as corruption, racial discrimination, pollution of environment, nuclear threat, and war on the poor take precedence over private issues such as who had sex with whom, which celebrity is gay, or who has filed for divorce etc. He best summarizes public

morality in terms of what Jesus described in Matthew 25: "In the final analysis who will (and who won't) get into heaven depends upon: Are the hungry fed? Does everybody have the housing, clothing, and health-care they need? Are those in prison treated humanely? Are we caring for the 'strangers' - the less fortunate or less competent among us - in the same way we would like to be cared for if we fell on hard times?"

### **Public Morality and Media**

Public morality is often enforced in a society by government, the police, or other social pressures directly or indirectly. Media wield the most powerful and wide ranging social pressure and impose formidable control over public behavior of the individuals. One cannot deny the significant role of media in public life because media are involved at the creation, protection, and evaluation of moral consciousness in a society. Since public morality is basically about relationship of human persons with others such relationship is can be created, supported, sustained, nurtured, and even damaged by communication media. However there is a perception that modern means of communication that are supposed to mediate affiliation among human beings seem to be adversely affecting human relationship and therefore said to be negatively influencing public morality. A large bulk of media programming seems to corroborate this impression because they seem to trivialize issues like marriage, family, and relationship by highlighting issues like polygamy, incest, divorce, drugs, pornography, prostitution, adultery, fornication, contraception, abortion, homosexual acts, gambling, drunkenness, public vulgarity, public nudity etc. Although producers of media events justify their programming based on their popular acceptance, they cannot absolve themselves of their responsibility towards public morality.

On many levels media could be linked to public morality. We can trace at least three important areas in which media are linked to public morality.

1. Media are constructors of public moral discourse. Media present content for conversation and therefore always on the lookout for stories that are newsworthy. By so doing they set the standard for what is right or wrong behavior and consciously or unconsciously establish certain norms for correct taste.

2. Media may be inciting promiscuity, sponsoring public vulgarity, or violating norms of privacy in the name of freedom of speech. Often media seem to highlight events that are depraved and sensational and construct questionable moral conversations.

3. Media have been the protector of the right of individuals and the right of expression. Frequently regulation of public morality may be at odds with the fundamental right to freedom of speech and media have been found at the side of truth and freedom of expression.

Harry Clor affirms (1969) that media can help to shape public moral conduct in two ways: first, they can prevent people from forming habits they might otherwise form; and second, they can help positively guide the formation of moral ideals. They can offer moral interpretation of certain conduct that may shape people's ideas about whether certain conduct is legitimate or not. They may offer public forum to discuss issues that may lead to the formation of clear moral norms. Media can provide models of good conduct and make moral ideals vibrant and attractive. They can also present alternative behavior to the more attractive but problematic public behavior.

The impact of media on the formation of moral ideals especially on the youth is extensively studied and documented (Livingstone, 2008, 2002, 1998). Often young people make moral judgment on the basis of their parents' ideals and practices, and begin to form some personal moral synthesis, drawing in varying degrees from a wide range of influences such as family, community, media and popular culture, educators, peer groups, friends, and their own conduct and reflection. The media are compelling socializing factors in the

life of the youth and therefore the former have far greater role to play in the social and moral consciousness of the latter.

Researches on media's role in public morality often deal with specific forms of sexual activities and the way media construct and impose their own mode of public moral conduct. It should be noted that most research seems to concentrate on media's involvement with private morality rather than public morality. It is imperative that studies on media activities should move beyond private morality that deals with personal and sexual matters and reach out to embrace larger social issues that affect human beings in public life. Let us pick up a few real life cases as they were constructed by media for our scrutiny.

### **Some Real Life Cases**

Media personnel often base their actions not on a specific media ethics but on their instincts. This does not mean that media institutions do not follow certain ethical norms. Different public institutions have different guidelines to determine public moral actions and media have their own. Let us pass on to a few real life cases in order to highlight some salient norms embedded in them.

**Case 1.** On a winter day (Dec 25, 2009) a Hyderabad based *ABN Andhra Jyothi News* aired three and a half minute video clipping showing N. D. Tiwari, The governor of the state of Andhra Pradesh, a veteran congressman and a freedom fighter in bed with three young women. The video was quite explicit which showed an old man kissing and performing lewd sex acts with young women. Tiwari resigned two days later caving into the pressure of the enraged public. He denied all charges and accused that those tapes were fake and blamed some politicians who used it to divert attention from the explosive Telangana crisis.

In this case media initiated a public moral discourse regarding the conduct of a public official who had sworn to protect the constitution. Did

media follow certain public moral norms in the coverage of the event and how could media justify their assumed role as the public's moral watchdog? The question is if the media took on themselves the role of the judiciary and constructed the public as moral police to condemn a man before he was given the due process to clear his name. Media might have acted with the best of intentions but did they have the proper authority to do so. It was the duty of media to bring to the public forum the activities of public figures but did media violate the individual right to privacy and due process?

**Case 2.** *The Free Press Journal* carried a story (December 22, 2009) that said that the Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) general secretary, Rajmohan Unnithan was arrested by the police on December 21 for "alleged immoral activities". The local people alleged that the house where he was caught in the act was being used for immoral activities and was under the radar of the police for some time. The Congress party suspended Unnithan who was held under the Immoral Trafficking Act. This case does not involve a government official who has sworn to protect the constitution but a party worker who succumbed to momentary passion.

By highlighting the story did the *Free Press Journal* assume a moral role that expects a public person to live an exemplary life and maintain an impeccable record of moral conduct? Thus media not only initiate a discourse on public morality but assume the role of educating the public regarding what is moral or immoral mode of conduct. Did the press violate the individual's right to privacy and condemned him or her before being established as guilty? By so doing did media excite the immoral imagination of people and render them insensitive to shady behavior? Through repetition of immoral messages media might encourage more such stories and render them acceptable in course of time. Besides, since such raunchy stories have commercial value do media indulge in an exaggerated diffusion of them?

**Case 3.** In September, 2005 some caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad were first published in a Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, and when it appeared first it created no uproar. However when they were

republished in early 2006 the Muslim leaders mobilized the entire Muslim world by calling to attention those images. The Muslim world took on arms against the author and the newspaper that published it and triggered violence and killing in many parts of the world.

Was the newspaper justified in publishing the cartoons or not? Who really constructed the story as news worthy or as objectionable material, the media or the Muslim leaders? Who was to blame for the violence and killing that followed after the publication, the media or the Muslim leaders? From these cases it is clear that there is no clear, hard and fast norm to uphold or condemn media action and a lot seem to depend on who, when, where, and how of the action. The above cases also indicate an intricate but intimate connection between media and public morality.

**Case 4.** The 2G Spectrum scam was first exposed by *the Business Line* in 31 May 2010 which was later pursued by many leading Indian newspapers. The scam happened in 2008 where rules and procedures were flouted while issuing licenses, allegedly costing the government Rs. 1.76 lakh crores (39 billion USD). When the Indian news media brought it to the public consciousness and initiated a discourse the public was outraged. As the public was warming into the story more such exposés of corruption in other areas of public life came to light. In six years, billions of rupees has been swindled by corrupted officials and politicians in the Spectrum Allocation, the Commonwealth Games, Adarsh Housing, and Indian Space Research Organization's deal, to name just a few. Media unearthed many secret deals that have been carefully covered up for many years and demanded an objective evaluation and revamping of the system.

Here we have an example of responsible media that mobilized the public, through the divulgation of true and fair information and called people to participate in their governmental activities and to bring to books their corrupt officials and leaders. These media activities rather than concentrating on private morality, focused on larger social concerns that affected millions

of people. They have attempted to wake people up from their apathy and guided them to seize the opportunity to reclaim their present and project their own future.

### **Media Sponsored Public Morality**

It should be noted that concepts of public morality are changing in India and many strongly held ideas and traditions of the past are being subjected to evaluation. Take for example: For many months the South Indian news media thrived on the scandalous story of Swami Nidyananda's affair with a well known actress. So long those who were implicated in the story went into hiding, their affair was news worthy but when they came out of their self imposed exile and faced the media, the story lost its glamour. And again take the example of the married politician in Delhi who was baited for a long time by the media for allegedly having an affair with certain woman. One day the man told media curtly that indeed he was having an affair and that it was his personal business and that the media had nothing to do with it. After that the media left him alone and the public was no longer interested in the story. Many such stories have currency only when media support their circulation. Often media create public opinion and impose certain moral behaviour as standard for all. However that could change with the changing attitude of the public. Therefore public morality cannot be based on the claims of any particular moral group and much less the media institutions. Morality has to be based on certain concrete tenets that have to be grounded on moral reasoning that has the wellbeing of the other and common good of the community as its goal. I want to highlight several areas of public morality in the area of media practice.

#### ***1. Sense of the Moral Order***

Media practice should be based on a profound sense of moral order in creating and disseminating information. Since they are in a position of guiding the action of people they should be extremely careful in their choice of information and the mode of diffusing it. In so doing they should accept

and respect the personal good of others and protect the wellbeing of people. Media have to protect those who are vulnerable and unprotected such as children, elderly, and the minorities. No media can violate the essential precondition of any human being's right to exist and pursue a goal. If no individual person has right to destroy the life of another it is even more so with regard to media. Media have no right to destroy a human person, attack their private lives, and pry into their personal matters. In their service to the public, media should respect truth and avoid falsehood in the sharing of information (mere sensationalism violates all tenets of media ethics and ends up destroying media's credibility). Without a good sense of morality based on truth there will not be a community. Besides we are all connected and each one is responsible for the other. Without this co-dependency communities will fall.

## *2. Upholding Human Right*

The fundamental right of the individual for information and for freedom of expression is to ascertain the dignity of the human person. Any media decision should respect this inalienable right of the individual who wants to be the sole arbiter of his or her own destiny. This includes that one has the deciding power within the national or communal life that one pursues. At the same time media should recognize the private and collective decision making power of the human community and encourage people to exercise that power. In order to make an educated decision people should have true information and therefore media are obligated to place before people relevant data. Media should be open and respectful of all aspects of diverse opinions of the same reality. In order to realize that media should give voice to the voiceless people and amplify their voice to be heard in public sphere. The Indian media were very much responsible for the victory of Anne Hazare who went on a fast protesting against corruption in the Indian political system.

### **3. Public Debate**

Public morality is largely a shared morality sustained by people in day to day encounters and interactions. Media should support any just debate that attempts to augment the quality of life of the people in a community and promote common good. To ensure this, media should criticize what is unjust and unfair and promote a profound sense of justice. There could be no compromise or tolerance when the quality of life of the people is at stake. To keep public moral debate going regarding common good, media should broker mediation between individuals and institutions. Often media institutions have the capacity to negotiate and broker social responsibility and promote moral behaviour. Media are the new Areopagus where people's rhetoric for enhancing their own destiny could be voiced. Such public debates would help construct people as harbingers of their own destiny and further democracy.

### **4. Relevant Information**

Public morality will be limited and be impaired if information offered by media is not accurate and complete. If information is not accurate and complete the decision made will be erroneous and limited which may handicap democracy and common good (Pornography offers exaggerated information and impair critical thought). Besides accurate and complete information media should present relevant information, that is, useful to people and enhance their social relationships. Such information not only highlights the present but carry people and society forward towards the future. Often democratic principles and issues of human wellbeing are underlined in the constitutions of every nation and media should invite and illumine discourse on the nation's own foundational document. In a country's constitution one can find sufficient base for public morality and media should promote critical appraisal of the constitution based on truth, justice, peace, and love. It is not only the governors and political leaders but also the people who ought to know their rights and duties and be responsible for the freedom and common good of all.

### ***5. Freedom of Expression***

Since public morality is a constructed reality it has to be sustained by free exchange of ideas, opinions, and values held by people. Only in a context of free exchange and uncensored interaction, moral systems can thrive and guide actions of individuals and communities. Therefore media personnel should ever be conscious of people's opinions and judgments without imposing their own as if they were the cherished voice and values of people. Media have the duty to create a climate in which people can freely and without censorship can form their own opinions. Through free flow of information media should provide free access to right and relevant information for people to form their own decisions without coercion and external pressures. Media should also become advocates of education in morality and moral reasoning. No public morality would be possible without sustaining the dignity of the human individual and media should ensure that people are presented with all that is necessary to make free and reasonable decision that would maintain their dignity. At the same time media should be the first to indicate and point out what is contrary to common good and personal dignity of individuals and help people constantly evaluate their cherished values and behaviour. Media should protect and promote the privacy of individuals and their right to residence and property. Public morality cannot be sustained without media's mediation that ensures people's right to write, to invent, to organize themselves politically, to pick up a profession, and to have an education and to hold worship of their choice.

### ***6. Democratic Society***

Media have greater responsibility to help maintain and improve democratic principles of freedom, equality, and common good through open and relevant information. Democracy can survive only when people are educated, have their basic needs taken care of and have the power of decision. In all these levels media have the duty towards educating, sustaining, and demonstrating to people their democratic duties and responsibilities. Often a

vast majority of the public has no participation in democratic events and is indifferent or even ignorant of their rights. Media personnel have to invite people to exercise their duties as citizens and reclaim their responsibilities toward their government. To do this they have to offer objective and impartial information to the public. The public has the right to form associations and pursue their professional goals without undue political or institutional pressures. Media should offer advocacy to people's ideals and aspirations and guide their actions towards a more equitable society. It is the democratic task of media to bring to record the conduct of public officials who are responsible for the wellbeing of the society. They should condemn every abuse and create public debate over issues that touch upon common good. Poverty, injustice, corruption and marginalization of the minorities should be dealt with a solid sense of morality.

### **Conclusion**

Media are cultural constructions that are dialectically related to the human beings in the creation, maintenance, modification of public moral consciousness. Although they have powerful sway over human thought and action their influence is highly limited on account of many different personal and social variables. However within their limited reach media must serve the interests of the human person because the good of the individual is the ultimate measurement of all media activities. Media should sustain and promote people's democratic ambitions and help them participate in civic life supporting people's right to make decision for their own future. This right to make decision depends upon the right kind of information, that is, information that is truthful and objective. Since truth is not the monopoly of one group or institution media should amplify different voices and opinions in order to help people arrive at truth for themselves. For this reason media cannot impose just one opinion or idea as the collective decision of people. Media can persuade people to make rational judgment without manipulating them using sentimental sensationalism.

It is the duty of media to serve the common good of the community not the profit of one person or a group. Common good could be pursued only if people are given adequate representation in the media management. People's participation in public debate also helps promote common good and quality of life. This debate on public forum should ensure a profound sense of justice and peace that openly denounces what is considered unjust and antisocial. By illuminating what is dark and inhuman media should promote a radical but positive attitude to guarantee and promote the good of all.

Media have vital role to play in public morality of a community at the level of discourse, discipline, and behavior. They should put forth socially sensitive programs that ensure the common good of all people rather than the economic profit of certain institutions they belong to. Media should not cave in to the hegemony that suppresses individualistic thought or radical thinking that may challenge their margin of profit. Rather a socially responsible media should serve the interest of people, especially those without status by providing them a participatory space in the creation, diffusion, and evaluation of media content. Media can uphold public morality by amplifying and ascertaining the still small voices of the broken people that demand a better future for themselves and their children.

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