1 Introduction

Among the modern media of mass communication, the newspapers undoubtedly are one of the oldest, the most influential and enduring medium of information. Though over the years the newspapers have undergone revolutionary changes, thanks to advancements in the area of information-communication-technology (ICT), there are many unchanging values in the press such as its social responsibility, commitment to promote democracy, credibility and truthfulness. Social responsibility of the press, which is the theme of the present study, implies the belief that the press has a basic responsibility to the public, and failing to do so would be undermining a fundamental trust the public has reposed in it. For this reason the press cannot be equated with other industry or business enterprises.

The present study is primarily focused on Northeast India. The press in the region is often blamed for reporting blood-dripping stories that deal with violence, insurgency and a host of other negative issues to the detriment of reporting news of development activities, peace efforts and people's movements. In the light of such negative coverage, which undermine economic growth and development, we seek to examine how responsible is the press in the region.

2 Research Site and Design

The research project has been designed to undertake content analysis of news, editorials, articles and letters to the editor of two pioneering newspapers of the region, namely, *The Assam Tribune* and *The Shillong Times* spread over a 3-year period, 2003-2005. The data contained in the two papers were examined for both quantitative as well as qualitative characteristics. Each news or op-ed page item has been analysed from a variety of angles to examine the social responsibility of the press. We used FoxPro 9.0 to enter and tabulate 24450 items distributed between news and op-ed pages. The computer programme enabled us to compute findings accurately and easily, as well as to retrieve data for re-examination or counter checking, thereby minimizing error.

The two newspapers were chosen as they are the most representative in the region in terms of history, prominence, circulation, nationalistic and patriotic objectives for which they were established, and the public support they enjoy as credible means of information. The period
chosen for the study also indicates that both the papers had completed at least 50 years of their existence, and the study marks the completion of the golden jubilee of India's independence.

3 Objectives

The study had the following objectives:
1. To assess the social responsibility of the press by analysing newspaper content.
2. To measure the various kinds of bias in print media in Northeast India.
3. To categorize the contents of newspapers in negative news and positive news.
4. To study how prominently does the press cover social issues.
5. To suggest ways to make the press more conscious of its social responsibility, and thereby fulfill its obligations to the public.

4 Hypothesis

While it was assumed that the newspapers under study have accepted the traditional roles and functions as their primary guiding principles, the following hypotheses pertaining to the social responsibility of the press were tested:
1. The print media in Northeast India is subject to bias (gender, urban-rural, and religious bias).
2. The press in Northeast India emphasizes more on negative news (violence, conflict, killing, kidnapping) as compared to positive news.
3. Press is not socially responsible.
4. Social issues such as education, health, development, peace and environment are not prominently covered.

5 Methodology

The researcher used content analysis as a method to study newspaper content. Since computer copies of the texts were not available, a manual checking of 312 newspapers were done, but the data entry, tabulation, analysis and interpretation were done through the computer programme. Each newspaper issue and each story was assigned a specific code number each to identity them and to avoid error of repetition. The variables examined for each item included the size of the columns, news location, space allotment, headline weightage,
photo prominence, gender, geographic location etc. to examine the prominence given to stories. The quality of content was studied by examining whether a news item is positive or negative, and by checking the level of its responsibility. Each story was classified under one of the 36 story themes and the frequency and prominence of each story was studied. The former indicated how often a story appeared, and the latter showed how prominently it was covered. Based on the data it was possible to prove the hypothesis of the study to be true.

6 Content Analysis

Content analysis as a methodology is extensively used to study characteristics and impact of media on society and individuals. Content could be newspapers, books, vision statements of organisations, policy documents of governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), reports of police cases, criminal records, suicide notes etc. The objectives include identifying the intentions of the communicators, determining psychological states of persons and groups, detecting propaganda and subversive tendencies in the publications of organisations and groups, securing political and military intelligence, addressing legal issues, studying cultural patterns, social and individual values, mores, interests, attitudes and so on.

Content analysis is widely used for media studies. It uses a set of categorisation procedures for making valid and replicable inferences from data (text or images) to their context. Inferences may be about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part. Since it can be applied to examine any piece of writing or occurrence of recorded communication, content analysis today is used in a variety of fields, ranging from marketing and media studies, to literature and rhetoric, ethnographic and cultural studies, gender and age issues, sociology and political science, psychology and cognitive science.

Communication research is traditionally divided into two basic genres: Media-centric research which focuses on the structure of the communications industry and on media content, with minimal attention to impact on the intended audience. Effects-centric research focuses on audience effects and takes media organisation and content as given. Content analysis is traditionally practiced as a media-centric methodology.
The present study has shown how content analysis can be effectively used as a methodology to study newspaper content. With the aid of suitable computer programmes, study of newspaper content can assist many social sciences as has been demonstrated here. The relevance of such studies become pertinent when we consider the fact that print media in India, which is both large and powerful, has few studies by way of examining its internal performance.

The study of social responsibility of the press in Northeast India is situated in the context of the history and growth of the press in India to get a glimpse of what the pioneers expected the press to be. This is followed by an extensive review of literature related to content analysis in media studies, journalism and press in India and the region, and important ethical issues in the press. The various theories of the press are studied in relation to democratic governance and the people's right to information.

7 Major Findings of the Study

The present study has resulted in the following findings: The press is subject to various kinds of biases. The press has a gender bias which is unfavourable towards women, and is expressed overtly and covertly in numerous ways – disproportionate presence of women in the press, particularly in positions of importance and power; absence of women as sources of information and comment. Proportionately the news items dealing with women are very few, they enjoy less prominence, bringing to light the fact that a gender bias against women does exist. It may be noted that news about women will continue to be less in the newspapers as long as politics continue to dominate news pages, and as long as women continue to be only marginally present in politics. Newspapers thus point, though unwittingly, to an existential reality, that is, marginalisation of women in politics, governance, administration etc. There is also an urban bias in the press, which is unfavourable to the rural areas and people. The urban news reports far outweigh the rural news. Often events that happen in rural areas are also covered from the urban centers without the reporters visiting the place.

The press has a religion bias manifested in inadequate coverage of news about religion, religious issues and events. Religion is often portrayed in the press when the event is negative and when there are scandals. There is a bias against religion both in terms of the
sheer quantity and quality of religious news reports. Ignorance about religions among journalists is also evident in the reports published. Sometimes a religious controversy is played up to enhance reader interest. Bias is also evident in the distribution and coverage between regional, national and international news items. Bias, whatever be its target and motif, affect the newspapers and erode their credibility.

The press focuses more on negative news (violence, conflict, killing, kidnapping) in relation to positive news, that is, news dealing with peace, harmony, development etc. Press has a penchant for sensational news and even tends to sensationalise news. Violent or sensational events get greater coverage in the newspapers than those that deal with peace and development. A militant gets more attention in the press than a peacemaker or social activist. Thus we can state that the press is inherently prone towards publishing the negative news.

The press needs to effect serious changes in its content and coverage if it is to be socially responsible and face the challenges posed by the new media, and the fast decline in newspaper readership worldwide. Politics, crime and violence are given proportionately much greater importance in terms of space and prominence than news about several other important issues. This leads to the downgrading of other important news items or their omission altogether. Newspaper content does not always fulfil the needs of the readers as they fail to address concerns that are important to them. There is a mismatch between reader interest as evident in the letters to the editor and rest of the content.

Press persons seldom analyse the content of the newspapers, and are often not aware of the subject-wise distribution of content issues, space allotment and prominence given to specific issues or the gender or geographic distribution of content. There has been no serious effort to study and analyse the contents of the newspapers in the region.

There exists hardly any training and on-the-job formation for the newspaper staff including reporters, sub-editors and editors. Qualitative improvement in content would evolve only when journalists’ competence increases. Editors are often not critical enough and thus many errors and unethical practices creep into the pages of the newspapers.

Newspapers do not adequately cover social issues. Our study has amply proved that the newspapers provide much space to report events and little space to cover issues.
Reporting social issues need a greater degree of competence and depth of knowledge. Politics, crime and violence dominate the content of the press. A serious effort to effect significant change in content is essential if the press is to live up to its social responsibility.

Newspapers give excessive coverage and prominence to celebrities at the detriment of neglecting rural poor and the majority of population. Information is being presented as entertainment leading to the increase of what is being described as infotainment.

One can witness the absence of serious effort to separate news and opinion. News is becoming more interpretative, opinionated and sensational. Sometimes opinion masquerade as news: the distinction between the two seems to be fast blurring in the press. News reports tend to be more and more opinionated today as there is a growing tendency to include editorial comments and editorialise the news. Activist journalism and advocacy journalism are on the increase. Indian newspapers have for long preserved objectivity by reporting news without editorial comments, and this has been a distinguishing trait of the journalism in the country. The readers expect from the newspapers depth of analysis, interpretation, elaboration, background etc. While these are necessary and welcome, it is not a healthy trend when reporters tend to editorialise news. Journalism trainees need to be taught to clearly differentiate news from opinion. It is for the editors to ensure that any unhealthy practice in trying to editorialise news be checked.

The reports of the regional and local journalists tend to show greater degree of bias, exaggeration and lack of professionalism. Proximity and emotional involvement as well as political, ethnic, religious affiliation of journalists sometimes colour their writings and often reduce objectivity and impartiality. News reports sourced from international agencies and sources as well as national news agencies show greater journalistic professionalism. But the regional press is sometimes over-dependent on the agencies for objectivity. Often the attribution is vague and generic.

Many local reports based on press releases received by the newspapers indicate poor editorial quality. Adjectives and expressions intended to enhance public relations image of the issuing organisations damage the quality of the reports. Newspapers by lowering standards to publish such reports are undermining their own credibility and the readers’ preference for well-written and objective stories. In several of the local news stories the
sources are not cited or are vague. This can considerably reduce the quality of news, making reporters less responsible. Local reporters tend to take for granted the requirements of providing to the readers the source of news. Some of the news items do not have sufficient news value as they do not have relevance to a large section of the readers.

8 Suggestions

The social responsibility of the press is the collective task of all - chief editor, editors, reporters, management or proprietor, ombudsperson and the public. The press, if it wishes to be socially responsible, ought to have a thorough knowledge of social issues, awareness about gender matters, and need to pay greater attention to rural realities, ensure adequate balance between news, features, letters to the editor and advertisements. Social responsibility is a goal, which can be achieved only gradually and through a careful and judicious process, something to which every newspaper ought to be committed, and strive for in view of the serious nature of the mandate the newspaper enjoys in the eyes of the public.

To overcome its gender bias, the press needs to pay greater attention to increase the number of news and features on women. Women need to be more often sources of information and should be quoted in the press. Stories related women should be given more prominence. The newspapers, if they are to successfully implement gender equality, must be willing to change the news perspectives and diversify the themes adopted for coverage. A greater emphasis on rural news and development issues can also contribute to improve gender balance. There should be a numerical gender balance in workplace in the press; women should be assigned important decision making roles and responsibilities. Newspapers should also periodically review their content to examine the quantity and quality of gender related news.

In order to address the problem of urban bias in the press, it is proposed that the newspapers give greater attention to the coverage of rural news. This can be effected by increasing the rural reporters and ensuring that they file stories from the rural areas. Greater financial allocation to enable rural reports should be adopted. It is necessary that the newspapers periodically check and verify the rural-urban ratio of reports to see where they stand. The press must also diversify its choice of themes to give attention to issues relevant to the rural people, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, rural development or lack of it, etc.
Newspapers can ensure that every reporter is assigned, at least for a few days of the month, to visit rural areas and report from location. Since the readers prefer regional news items as their first choice, followed by national news and international news items, the press needs to maintain a judicious balance between the three.

The study has found the reporting on religion inadequate and biased. The reporters should be trained on religious matters and issues, and the press should give more attention to cover stories on religion more comprehensively and accurately. Newspapers should, periodically, undertake content analysis to find out the number and kind of stories on religion and other issues published by them. The data on positive and negative news in the newspaper content show that negative news are far more than positive news in number, and that they enjoy a higher prominence index and prominence impact. Journalists and media firms consider negative news as more newsworthy. Traditional news perspectives on newsworthiness of events should be re-examined and reformulated. Even when covering negative news items, the press should provide background information, which includes causes of conflict or violence, and efforts being made to restore normalcy, peace and other steps to improve the situation.

The press needs to become socially more responsible if it is to fulfil its mandate. It is not enough that the newspapers have more responsible items than irresponsible items; it needs to ensure that stories are objective and authentic. Social responsibility will be enhanced when newspaper staff, public authorities and the consumers consciously strive to improve the quality of the newspaper content to make it more wholesome and constructive. The study also found that several important social issues are not covered adequately. When the press consciously adopts a policy focusing more attention on the marginalised, the minorities, rural population, women, and emphasize development issues, the press would undoubtedly become more responsible.

9 Proposals

The methodology for carrying out content analysis of newspapers as developed and used in the present research can be effectively used by newspapers, students of journalism and others for sociological studies. The findings could be compared with data on reader
expectations, public perception, impact and audience feedback. The public needs to monitor and analyse how the press deal with certain issues pertinent to society. Greater exchange, interaction and review of the findings of content analysis with the public and the journalists would be mutually beneficial.

Using this or similar methods of content analysis, smaller samples could be selected from several newspapers across the country to study the press coverage of just one single issue. The method is also suited for area specific or subject specific content studies. For instance, a researcher desiring to study any particular item such as news, editorials, photographs, letters to the editor etc. can do so. Similarly major headlines and related stories of a week in the country or a region could be studied to examine how the newspapers dealt with particular issues. As more and more newspapers are becoming available on the Internet, and as soft copies of archival materials are also becoming obtainable, it would be easy for researchers to use one of the several computer programmes available for content analysis.

A possible further research is to undertake a comparative space allotment, prominence and content of the advertisements. Study of advertisements would help understand the target group of the newspaper audience such as age, income category, consumer preferences etc. It is also important to study how advertisers control and influence the newspaper content, influence behaviour, social habits, policies etc. Researchers can also compare what is available as content with what is absent and what ought to have been published. Content analysis data could be compared and co-related with audience surveys and reader preference studies. Comparing the news source with the content quality would help to understand issues like reporter or source bias, professional quality etc.

Small and medium newspapers and vernacular press need to be promoted more conscientiously. Single newspaper towns need alternative newspapers so as to provide alternative perspectives and to avoid monopoly. The nature and quality of newspaper content will depend very much on professionalism on the part of the newspaper management and vigilance and active participation by the public. All stakeholders need to work collaboratively and concertedly to promote understanding and awareness about regional, national and global issues, to avoid bias and to ensure that the press is socially responsible.
Newspapers need to balance the content in favour of processes than events. Even violent events need to be reported in a perspective, and the press should not ignore causes of conflict that lead to violence, peace processes, etc. We need to re-examine and if necessary reformulate the traditional definitions and canons of journalism that tend to highlight negative issues as more newsworthy than constructive events.

10 Conclusion

When one observes the growth and expansion of the press in the Northeast, it is important to examine critically its social responsibility. The study assumes particular significance in the light of a host of problems such as militancy, unrest, unemployment, lack of development, geographical isolation and ethnic and linguistic unrest, linguistic plurality. The press in India from its inception was seldom seen as a medium of entertainment, or a means to make profit, but as a powerful tool to promote national interest and development.

The press in India possesses many admirable qualities. It has enjoyed the trust and confidence of the masses. Personalities like Raja Rammohun Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and a galaxy of eminent personalities, through their involvement in the field of newspaper journalism, have lent prestige to the profession and ennobled it. Some of the leading journalists and editors who followed the path traced out by them in the post-independent history of Indian journalism have carved out a niche for themselves for objectivity, impartiality, patriotism, professional integrity and ethical conduct. But the phenomenon of the shrinking social space in newspapers has become a major concern for media critics and readers of newspapers.

Today the press is tempted to leave behind the majority who are left in the margins, the voiceless, the marginalized sections, the dalits, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, the rural and urban poor, who hardly ever figure in the pages of the newspapers. The inadequate representation or near absence of these categories in the mainstream press often betray a lack of social commitment. Lack of appropriate training about ethical, moral and social issues, absence of adequate laws and regulations within the press, affect journalistic work, making it socially less responsible. The conflict approach to news coverage gives prime news space and news time to those urging violence and ignores those working for non-violent
solutions to various problems. Newspapers need to shift its emphasis from negative news to balance the news coverage with positive and neutral news items. Development communication and positive news need to be given more prominence in order to have a balanced and healthy newspaper.

Definitions of news are not static, and news values such as prominence, conflict, and timeliness have been modified in recent years, not always to the benefit of the news audience. News elements and criterion on what constitutes news needs to be reviewed. News is also a highly perishable commodity. News has a shelf life. Nothing is as old as yesterday's news. It is helpful for news reporters, the news audience, and news sources to distinguish between the timeliness of news and the immediacy of news coverage. Timeliness speaks of the topicality and relevance of a news report. There is a danger that the substance of a report will suffer in the quest for the glitter of immediacy.

Newspapers not only provide information, but also manifest bias in numerous ways. The strong pro-urban bias is evident in the number and kind of news featured in the newspapers. Bias is also evident in the way the press portrays individuals or ethnic communities, racial groups or people of different nationalities and genders.

The press has its own unique role and function in society. Therefore, instead of resting on the laurels of the past, the newspaper industry in India needs to introspect on its current performance and plan for its future. The healthy press is not a finished product. It is ever evolving. The present study, it is hoped, would some way contribute to this ongoing process of evolution, growth and change.