

11th International Anti-Corruption Conference: Workshop 2.2

Presentation Abstract

1. Panelist Name: Kunda Dixit	2. Workshop Title: Media integrity and governance
3. Title of case-study or paper: The perils and futility of investigating corruption in the age of media commercialism	

The most difficult part of covering corruption as a journalist in countries such as Nepal is to figure out where to start. When corruption is so endemic, so accepted, such a given, how do you decide what to open-up first?

After you decide to investigate, if you can penetrate the secretive world of officialdom (which usually leaves no paper-trails), and you come out with a story, then you still hit the brick wall of apathy. All your painstaking investigation, hard work, interviews and even undercover work will come to naught because everyone will pretend they didn't hear or see your story.

It is this wall of silence and acceptance that is most unbearable. The crooks will lie low and won't utter a squeak, hoping that the whole thing will blow over. The bureaucrats who are on the take will keep quiet for the same reason. The judiciary and civil society will ignore it because it means more work. The politicians never want to rock the boat, and will make sanctimonious noises but will look the other way. The rival media will ignore the story and won't do follow-up because it is seen as someone else's scoop.

So, what to do? It doesn't mean we stop covering corruption. We can't be forever undecided about where to start, we can't say no one does anything so there's no point. We can't give up. In the past few years of running newspapers and magazines in Nepal our experience is:

1. Choose the corruption case that affects people at the human level: medicines denied, text books undelivered, lives lost because someone somewhere embezzled money destined for the underprivileged.
2. Choose the subject that is most blatant, where the culprits won't even mind admitting on record that they have to steal.
3. Work in partnership with public interest litigation groups and civil society to magnify the impact of your work so that there is follow-up after the public is informed.
4. Follow-up, follow-up, follow-up. Never leave a story in mid-air. The corrupt either keep on doing what they are doing, they go into hiding but keep on stealing, or they are caught. Either way, it's still a story.
5. Personal outrage. This is the journalism of outrage. As journalists and citizens we must feel a sense of anger that such things happen.
6. Don't open up too many fronts. Don't try to go in waving your machete at all and sundry. Chose your enemy carefully. Hit surgically and have a strategic plan for maximum impact.
7. Ignore journalistic competition, be prepared even to share your story with rival media for greater impact. Pick print, radio and television partners and break the story on the same day in a wide spectrum of media. The crooks will find that harder to ignore.

Case studies from Nepal and the South Asian region:

1. Fuel adulteration
2. Wildlife poaching
3. Supreme court
4. Pyramid scheme
5. Tehelka.com