

ETHICS OF INDIAN NEWS MEDIA: ABERRATIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of media ethics with special reference to the Indian news media. In India media ethics have been a convention associated with the traditional mass media. But with the development in technology and the advent of the internet the standard ethical practices are facing continuous challenge. This paper discusses three incidents where the traditional mass media - the press or television - deviated from the established ethical principles and journalistic norms normally practiced by the Indian news media. This paper will explore those aberrations and analyze the ethical principles of the news media that has been manipulated for a more worldly purpose. The paper draws conclusion on the future of media ethics in the context of Indian news media.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves recommendations on right and wrong conduct. Media ethics is a topic for discussion for nearly a century. As the influence, impact and existence of media have become widespread its moral stance and adherence to ethical codes have become important issues. Ralph. E Hanson¹ (2015) has stated that media ethics is a complex topic because it deals with an institution that must do things that ordinary people in ordinary circumstances would not do. Media ethics deals with the specific ethical principles and moral standards of all forms of media including print, broadcast, film, theatre, advertising and the internet.

The ethics of journalism is one of the most well defined branches of media ethics and is often the most discussed one. The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics² has four main tenants: a) Seek truth and report it, b) Minimize harm, c) Act independently and d) Be accountable and transparent. The subject of ethics in journalism has to deal with a variety of things like manipulation of content (by governments, corporates or by journalists themselves or their organizations), distinction between public interest and privacy of individuals or confidentiality (for guarding the rights of individuals or securing national interests), and conflict with the law of the land regarding protection of news sources.

In democratic countries like India although the freedom of the media is constitutionally enshrined and have precise legal definition and enforcement, the exercise of that freedom by individual journalists is subject to several clauses like the perspective of the media proprietor, the resources available for reporting any event or incident, the perspective of the readers or audience as well as the related reporter and thereby ethics of the concerned journalists. In modern democracies effective communication channels in the form of mass media are imperative for ensuring accountability of the elected representatives and transparent governance. Today the mass media is inevitable to the extent that if freedom of media disappears, so would most political accountability. But the question that exists in most situations is whether the constitutional freedom can be exercised in all its earnestness given the other hurdles confronting the journalists. Here the ethical concerns and values assume significance. The key principles of ethics in such situations is elucidated by Plaisance (2009)³, “**Idealism** - how strongly we feel about the pursuit of humanitarian goals and **Relativism** –the belief that the only way we can decide what’s right and what’s not is to rely on our own experiences and internal moral ‘compass’”.³ But embedded in these principles are the assumptions that journalists would be objective, be committed to the truth, avoid sensationalism and operate without external pressures.

The objective of this paper is to understand the influence of ethics on Indian news media in particular through a few instances in the recent history. We are aware that the traditional mass media like the press and television face a huge challenge when confronted with the possibilities of the new media. Garrison⁴ (1996) stated the advent of New Communication Technology (NCT) has brought forth a set of opportunities and challenges for conventional media. The interactive and more social mode of operation, the close proximity between the sender and the receiver in the

virtual sense, instantaneous feedback, extreme flexibility and simplicity of the medium and huge accessibility gives the new media great advantages over the traditional media. When we put in retrospect the news dissemination ability of the two media then we can see their differences in reach, accessibility, flexibility and interface. While adversaries may argue that the internet has limited accessibility to most people in India, with a rapidly developing information and communication technology and mobile connectivity, internet connection is rapidly being made available with many users.

The traditional news disseminating media like the newspapers, radio and television faced with such a versatile and societal opponent is using innovative news disseminating techniques, depending on sensational even scandalous news items, raking up issues that were previously considered in bad taste for the news media or were outside the domain of public interest and therefore left untouched. There are a few advantages of a more assiduous and over-active press and television news media. It means that more issues now become the prerogative of the news media, issues which were left unscathed for all these years. It also means that perhaps with the widening of the ambit more people, more sections, more groups who were not represented earlier get reflected in the news items or stories dished out by the press and news channels. But the compulsion to out shine competition can weigh heavily on moral and ethical responsibilities. The study will discuss on the ethical standards of news journalism in the traditional mass media of India in the face of new market forces.

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA

The role of the Indian press in the freedom struggle of the nation is remarkable. The press was a powerful weapon of freedom fighters in both direct and indirect way. The leaders of the nationalist movements aired their views, motivated the people and mobilized support for the various movements through their writings in the press and even published their own newspapers for the purpose. The great leaders of our independence movement Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru and other luminaries relied on newspapers for disseminating nationalists' views and sentiments. The extremist in the struggle for Indian freedom also relied on the press besides their revolutionary activities for reaching the masses. So Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Aurabindo Ghosh and their likes also relied on the impact of

the printed words. The press, the only mass media of the time independent of the British influence, became not only a weapon of the Indian freedom struggle but also identified itself with the independence movement of the nation.

Post-independence, the focus of the press underwent a sea-change. There was no opponent in sight (as far as the Congress party was concerned) and the first few decades were dedicated to trailing of the official line, quoting the government sources (which were considered the only authentic news sources at that time and therefore given utmost importance and priority) and highlighting issues and perspectives that towed the official version. The press became an extension of the government in power. The other emerging mass media at that time, television, was worse. The only available network Doordarshan was a government-controlled body in every sense with the party in power deciding its content and programs. The national emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1977 somewhat jolted the press out of its long hibernation. The strangulation on freedom of expression and a general crushing of independent interaction and transmission awakened it from its stupor. Most sections of the press protested vehemently and vociferously. The anti-government stance and expression against government policies and programs became more frequent and in the 1980s the newspapers started to look out for alternative voices and news sources, focus on varied issues other than those in official circulation like those dealing with development and empowerment and concentrate on investigative journalism. At the onset of the 1990s press assumed the role of whistle-blowers in the society disseminating news and findings on issues which were controversial and even clandestine but which had important social consequences. The issue of ethics in news journalism was discussed and scrutinized repeatedly as shocking, at times outrageous, and often contentious methods were used to encapsulate news.

THE AVAILABILITY OF INTERNET AND ONLINE NEWS

In the 1990s there was no change of status for the national television channel as it was still under the clutch of the government but the emergence of satellite television under private ownerships somewhat revolutionized television content and viewership expectations. The audio-visual impact of the medium along with penetrative news items, proximity to issues transmitted through live television and chances of instant interaction through talk shows and live phone calls during broadcast heightened audience interest and contributed to a growing viewership. The press, not to

be left behind in this competition, started online editions of their printed version. Now news was 24x7, virtual and omniscient and the two most acceptable traditional mass media – the press and the television - outdid themselves to ensure visibility, accessibility and newness to overwhelm their readers and audience.

The two mass media also started to use the internet as a news source and quote references and viewpoints from the new source. They “googled” every information and explored other search engines for information related to their news items. In the initial stage the internet was a news source for the other mass media. Gradually it became a useful news source for the masses themselves thereby reducing the importance of the traditional news media, namely the press and the television. When addressing the usefulness of the Internet from the viewpoint of information acquisition the following two points may be mentioned. The first is the Internet’s usefulness as a source of low-cost information. The perceived low cost of using the Internet for information searching is established by the comparison of the Internet with other informational channels. In this view, the superiority of the Internet to other channels is an important factor. The second point is that the Internet is a useful way to obtain information that cannot be obtained from traditional sources. The advances of the Internet have transcended the limitations of the traditional media. There are several studies that conclude that the Internet provides an opportunity for users to share a variety of information^{5 & 6} (Chen & Xie, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). The traditional media and the users both realized the advantage of the internet when it came to internet searching for disseminating and collecting information. The online newspapers gave the traditional press an opportunity to stave off some of the challenges of the broadcast media through its flexibility and easy availability while the live streaming of television news channel widened their audience base. But both traditional mass media were at a disadvantage because of the advances of the internet as it gave users direct accessibility to news and information and made them somewhat free from their dependence. The traditional news media sought ways and means to secure reader/audience attention. They changed their approach to news presentation and became more desperate sometimes forgoing ethical values and moral standards. A study of the different news items, the details included in the news, the language and ways of presentation and sometimes the technique of collecting the news posed serious consternation for journalistic ethics. This was a phenomenon not exclusive to the India but was prevalent in the whole world. The new media which was

uninhibited posed a serious threat to journalistic ethics of prevalent mass media. The tenets of truth, objectivity, accountability and transparency appeared archaic and difficult to conform to.

INSTANCES OF VIOLATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES BY THE INDIAN MEDIA

We know that the distinctive features of news writing are accuracy, precision, impartiality, objectivity and public accountability. Yet these “canons of journalism” has come under serious threats in recent times. The news organizations and the reporters and broadcasters overlook and sometimes disregard the “code of ethics” in the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public. This can be because of a variety of reasons like evoking sensationalism, increasing readership and viewership, pressure from proprietors, coercion from powerful and useful news sources and selective diffusion and retention of news items by journalists themselves due to one or several of the previously stated reasons.

Let us consider the first example. Most journalistic code of ethics comprises the principle of “limitation of harm”. This involves the withholding of certain details from news reports like the names of minor children, crime victims or information not relevant to particular news reports, the release of which might harm someone’s reputation or life or impede the function of the administration. The Aarushi murder case that set off a media frenzy is a case in point. A teenager girl named Aarushi Talwar was murdered along with a domestic servant of her house in a posh Delhi locality in 2008. The double murder case came under intense media scrutiny with the manner and grammar of the coverage triggering a debate on the limits of the media. The media pronounced guilt and innocence without proper corroboration by the concerned authority. Media’s constant pressure forced the investigating agency (the CBI) to take the help of the Supreme Court which passed a restraining order barring the media from any scandalous or sensational reporting on the case. Justice Altamas Kabir stated⁷ “We are asking the press not to sensationalize something which affects reputations.” But the broadcast media and the press cannot be unilaterally blamed. The news was in circulation in the internet too and the television channels and newspapers used the technique of “reconstruction” of the crime scene and incident to accentuate hype and interest of the audience/readers in the issue. The need to sensationalize the news emerged from the need to remain relevant and crucial in the public domain. The ethical norms and legal standards make clear distinction between “in public interest” and “interest to the public”. While the first regards the

issues relating to the benefit of the public, the second concerns issues which the public may find interesting. The news items which belong to the second category should be carefully chosen and judiciously presented so that it does not intrude upon the privacy of subjects or impair their reputation. Mass media, being easily available and highly accessible, need to be vigilant and differentiate clearly between what and how much the general public needs to know.

The issues that “interest the public” can become at times become grave threat to the security of individuals and nation. The deviation of the Indian media from established ethical standards is more prominent in the following example. I am talking about the media, especially television coverage during the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008. The coverage of 26/11 attacks by the television channels in India came under severe criticism for turning a blind eye to the safety of the hostages, the security of the rescuers and above all the national interest. While all the other attack points were freed from terrorists by the 28th morning, the Taj Hotel remained under the control of the terrorists. The television coverage helped the terrorists by showing everything in their live coverage from the vantage point of the rescuers to the possible strategies and measures to be adopted by the National Security Guards in the “Operation Black Tornado” without bothering about the impact it would have on the security concerns and delaying the rescue process. The sensationalism of live coverage of a rescue mission assisted a buoyant viewership which perhaps goaded the news channels to plan their telecast in the said manner. Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)⁸ concluded that the newspapers’ coverage of the 26/11 terror attacks was more balanced and ethical than that of electronic media. But this can be attributed to the nature of the print medium which had time to verify and present the relevant facts and stories, unlike the television channels which had to rush with their reports and had to always concentrate on ‘being the first in the race’. Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)⁹ stated that there was strong opposition to the way the electronic media sensationalized the attacks and a necessity to regulate media content during emergencies was felt. The Indian government chose to respect press freedom and abstained from regulatory measure but the News Broadcasters’ Association (NBA) of India developed a code to be adhered to in the time of emergencies. This instance clearly shows the media’s flouting of ethical norms. The television channels can claim that the live feeds were available in the social networking sites and the internet but there is no doubt that the television was a more prominent presence and the pictures telecast by the TV cameras were uploaded by the social networking sites.

The commercial viability of the transmission in terms of popularity and advertisement sponsorship muted ethical principles. It would be an interesting study to make a quantitative analysis of the advertisement revenues for the national channels at the time of the live telecast.

There have been repeated allegations against the media both press and television for conducting “sting” operations. Though sting operations provide startling revelations that benefit the society because of its exposure of truth, critics have questioned the ethical veracity of the use of the sting tactic for journalistic agenda. The sting operation can be used by the media to expose truths, espouse causes or realize societal agenda but it is attached with falsehood and bias and provides no scope to the victim to defend himself/herself under the circumstances. Such sting operations can unravel the truth but leaves a lot to desire when faced with questions on ethical propriety. The one-sided affair is a blot on the journalistic code of fairness and impartiality.

Let us take the example of “Operation West End” popularly known as “Tehelka” revelations in 2001. “Tehelka,” which means sensation, a weekly newspaper released video footage of top officials and politicians receiving bribes. The footage captured by the way of a sting operation exposed corruption at the highest order. But despite its ambitious intentions, after the initial shockwaves, the public became uninterested in the proceedings of the case. The methods used by the Tehelka reporters (women, liquor and bribing unsuspecting victims and violating their rights in the process found little approval of the public. The revelations created quite a stir regarding the ethical issues associated with the exposure. The Tehelka journalists were involved in false impersonations, paid bribes to the victims on false pretext and were guilty of other ethical transgressions too. The use of sting operations to expose corruptions in the society as against traditional investigative reporting techniques found few takers. Though after the Tehelka operation, several other sting operations involving Bollywood personalities, small-time politicians and government officials were undertaken the activities failed to have the desired effect. There is no doubt that traditional investigative journalism cannot be replaced by sting operations where the effects may be stark but the foundation is disparaging. According to Sadhu¹⁰, “an occasional sting operation may serve the cause for the time being. But it is no alternative to investigative journalism. To build its credibility and ensure its freedom under democracy, the media in India will have to turn to investigative reporting.” There are various impediments like pressure of creating sensation to attract reader/audience attraction; predetermined agenda of proprietors or editors or the pressure

of being the first to deliver the ‘breaking news’ to the users in the face of stiff competition from numerous news channels and several hundred newspapers. The Tehelka sting operation and others that followed were repeatedly aired in the national television channels in the subsequent days till the public lost interest in them.

CONCLUSION

Journalists have to act independently not only for the sake of maintaining ethical standards but for zealously guarding their freedom and their constitutional rights. Journalists everywhere play a vital role in providing the public with knowledge and understanding. They must therefore remain sensitive to issues such as fairness, accountability and accuracy. Reporters continuously need to ask themselves ethical questions throughout different stages of their investigations and be ready to justify their decisions to editors, colleagues, and the public. Usually, the ethical way of accomplishing tasks is tougher, but all reporters should be willing to confront such a challenge if they want to protect the sanctity of their media. The Indian media has always held a high moral ground in the dissemination of news items. The few examples I cited in the previous paragraphs must therefore be aberrations from the usual.

But it is also a fact that the presence of the powerful new media poses a challenge of greater proportions to the traditional mass media. The several advantages of the new media as discussed in one of the sections of this paper along with the advances in communication and information technology (ICT) gives it a thrust which the traditional media cannot hope to compete. The traditional mass media would be compelled to use the facilities offered by the internet for information gathering and assembling widening the information acquisition platform. But the mass media need to be careful while selecting the information sources or circulating any specific item. The presence of an omniscient media would facilitate the end users but for the existing mass media, it would be a challenge to counteract the advantages of the new media and make themselves viable to readers/audience. It is also a challenge to the mass media to conform to conventional journalistic norms and ethical standards while disseminating and collecting news. The news in the internet would be somewhat uninhibited and widespread as there would be both familiar and new news sources. Moreover continuous ingress of new senders and receivers would mean absence of regulation and unrestrained information exchange. The journalistic code of ethics calling on accuracy of facts, minimizing harm to sources and subjects, resolve to act independently and freely

whatever the circumstances and determination to remain transparent would be the mast-bearer for the conventional media. The high standards of Indian journalism in the past and the acceptability and availability of the mass media at present would ensure the existence of ethical principles in the Indian news media.

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