

Media Ethics: Importance and Self-Regulation

Satnam Singh¹
Ashish Sharma²

Assistant Professor - I, Amity School of Communications,¹
Amity University Gwalior, Maharajpura, 474005 (MP)
Email: sattunatak@gmail.com

Phone: 9643148800

Assistant Professor - II, Amity School of Communications,²
Amity University Gwalior, Maharajpura, 474005 (MP)

Email: asharma18.01@gmail.com

Phone: 9459960281

ABSTRACT

The 'Fourth Estate' has degraded in professional and ethical standards as Journalists have gone berserk and deserted their moral values which is harming the interests of the society. Mad rush for wealth and materialistic assets had forced them to indulge in yellow journalism. Advertisements and TRPs have become the new motivating force for the media houses with news as a glamorous product produced for entertainment. Journalists should voluntarily follow codes of conduct and ethics. These ethics are not for controlling media but are necessary for fair and objective use of media for maintaining freedom of speech and expression in true spirit. This involved a sensitive balancing act to protect the rights of individuals while exercising the right to freedom of expression. The freedom of media should be preserved and protected. Any direct or indirect interference from state, the owner, or other sector is violation on its freedom to discharge its duties towards the society. However, if there is no responsibility and no obligation attached to media, its freedom slowly declines away. Thus, media have a responsibility towards the society and self-regulation is the only answer.

Keywords: Ethics, Expression, Responsibility, Yellow Journalism.

I Introduction

“Journalism is a profession that serves. By virtue, thereof it enjoys the privilege to ‘question’ others. This privilege includes the right to collect information from primary authentic sources, which are of use and importance to the society or the nation and then report the same in an unbiased and positive way with the aim to inform and not to create sensation and harm the public. Any direct or indirect interference from state, the owner or other sector is encroachment on its freedom to discharge its duties towards the society.”

The freedom of media is the key of democracy, this freedom should be protected not only from outside interference but equally from those within. An internal mechanism for adherence to guidelines is sought to be ensured through mechanisms such as ‘letters to the editor’, internal ombudsman, media council of peers and media watch groups which focus the wrongs committed by the media persons, journalists or the management. These measures not only ensure the accountability of the media and act as a brake on the arbitrary and unbridled use of power but also help to heighten the credibility of the media.

“Let noble thoughts come to us from every side” is the eternal message of the Rigveda, given several millennia ago, represents the freedom of expression. Gandhi also promoted a similar concept and stated that he kept all windows of his mind open so that fresh air comes from all directions but his feet were firmly set on his own ground (Kuthiala, 2010). We live in an information society. Mass communication is the life blood of human society and power through which we develop, maintain and improve human relationships. The media is an indispensable pillar of democracy. Journalism is a force, which binds a society or nation with a common cement of information. The fundamental objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views, comments and information on matters of public interest in a fair, accurate, unbiased and decent manner or language. In the new era, it has assumed prominence because of its potential as a “change agent”. It informs, innovates, moulds, and impresses people living in a country or region. Human are in a supine posture as far as the bombardment of news, views, critical comments, and thoughts on their minds is concerned. Journalism not only informs us about the latest happenings, but also it makes us aware of the sensitive issues, which must be addressed by a society or nation. Mission of journalism is to create a humanity that lives as one unit and is

related to each other. Journalism, supported by high-technology tools like TV, DTH, and Internet, makes us believe that we are living in a Utopia, Literally! (Kumar, 2004).

Journalism is nothing but the pursuit of truth and to be first to break news cannot be the essentialities of journalism. It cannot be to provide a mix of relevant and irrelevant information bits to the society. It has to relate to the growth and development of the individuals and groups. Nowadays, morality, in the context of journalism, is a matter of choice. No field of human endeavour can escape the wrath of journalism- Stock markets, business tycoons, MNCs, political parties, households, NGOs, the UNO and its organs, people in power and those out of its corridors, core sectors of the economy, the hoi polloi of a nation, VVIPs, celebrities of the tinsel world of cinema, authors, painters, artists, farmers, and many more are adequately covered by the media on a minute – by minute basis. Thus, the targets of journalists are vulnerable to the photographic tricks, live coverage, blunt questions, and sarcastic comments of the latter. Serving the information needs and aspirations of the people and promoting a positive climate of development is no more a priority of the media. Rather, gathering audience for the advertisers is the main job of the present day popular newspapers and media. In this light, present study has been undertaken to reflect upon the role of the media and its ethics which are centre stage in the contemporary world.

II Research Methodology

In order to draw the inferences, different types of research studies showing the conditions of journalists and mass media have been used.

Objectives of Study: Specifically; the objectives of the study are:-

- To study the present media scenario and to know how the role of the media is changing from a mission to business.
- To analyse what are the ethical problems which tend to describe how journalists of today are fallible.
- To find out the solution to ethics problem.

III Results and Discussion

The media is an indispensable pillar of democracy. It purveys public opinion and shapes it. Media not only reports but acts as a bridge between the state and the public. Parliamentary democracy can flourish only under the watchful eyes of the media. In 1948, the United Nations made the Universal Declaration of Human Rights laying down certain freedoms for the mankind. According to it, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”. Also, Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution of India confers to all citizens, right to freedom of speech and expression. Article 361A also supports the freedom of the speech and expression. The media accepts certain restrictions on these freedoms, if they impinge on the freedoms of other individuals, or if they are in the public interest. Article 19(2) provides reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. As Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru once said that there is no such thing as absolute freedom. Freedom is always accompanied by responsibility. From the early days, the media took the self-imposed responsibility to inform and guide the public. The state also imposes certain responsibilities on the media which in the end intended to protect individuals and institutions from libel, defamation or invasion of privacy (IGNOU, 2008).

But, media or the tip of the pen is capable of doing more damage to the nations and societies of our times than a gun or sword if not used properly. A gun or sword can mutilate the bodies of human, but a pen can annihilate a nation. Pen is mightier than sword, but this pen or media can be controlled by the:

- (a) employer who would force him to write what he (the employer) says. Moral values were set aside by many journalists to promote newspaper, radio stations and television channels for which they worked.
- (b) mad rush for money and materialistic assets that would force him to indulge in yellow journalism.
- (c) hunger of the new generation of the masses for immoral content that would persuade him to write obscene, untoward, and anti-social literature.
- (d) limitations imposed by the social and cultural factors so that he is not allowed to write on certain sensitive issues.

The media has always been criticized for not following any code of conduct. The Tehelka Expose, Virbhadr Singh’s voice tapes asking for favour in appointments of employees in Himachal Pradesh, yellow journalism, cheque book journalism, sex and glamour in the print media, and TV ads etc. are some of the examples that force us to raise an accusing finger against the media.

Gone are the days when Gurumurthys and Arun Shouries exposed the misdeeds of the big corporates and were lionised and idolised by journalist. The “Guru” of the Abhishek Bachchan variety has arrived. Also, with the advent of paid news, media houses themselves have institutionalised the incentive or bribe. There are some ethical problems tend to describe how journalists of today are fallible:-

- Payola or envelop journalism or cheque book journalism or paid news concept: The term is used when money or gifts are given in expectations of favourable coverage from journalists.
- Mud-slinging, yellow journalism and sensational journalism are the outcomes of the lust of man for money.
- Plagiarism: It is the stealing of the thoughts or writings of others and representing them as their own without crediting the source. It is not only unethical, it is illegal.
- Withholding information.
- Deceit.
- Invasion of privacy.
- Criticism of rival paper and smear campaigns.
- Publication of false stories.
- Propaganda.
- Publishing of raunchy stories and fleshy gossip or obscene writing.
- The paparazzi Syndrome.
- Leak information and mint millions.
- Nip him in the bud.
- Newspapers, magazines and TV channels beat their own trumpets.
- The journalists alter the news to promote the personal interests.
- Defamation.
- News and views are replaced by ads.

All this is done in the name of Freedom of the press. When Lady Diana was dying, the paparazzi (Press photographers) were shooting her to feed photographs to the global tabloids. They were not keen to save her or take her to the hospital. This event proves that the journalists of today could be ruthless too!

Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke received the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for her feature story, “Jimmy's World”, the account of an eight-year old heroin addict. Publication of the story set off widespread demands for the government to do more about the scourge of drugs in society. A few days after Cooke accepted the Pulitzer, it became evident that she had made up the story.

In detailing the events of the Janet Cooke incident, David L. Eason focuses on the pressures which may have led Cooke to concoct her report (Eason, 1986). Eason theorizes that Cooke, a young, black, female reporter, may have felt compelled to give the liberal, white, male editors of the Post exactly what they seemed to demand. In Eason's view, the editors would not have sent out one of their own (i.e., a male white reporter) into the urban slums to obtain details of life there. As such, the paper made itself overly dependent on material supplied by inexperienced reporters like Cooke.

Eason sees the end of the Cooke story as taking on mythical trappings. Established journalism, in the role of the defender of the faith, ultimately cast out the violator of its moral code. Cooke's ostracism from the profession was seen, at least by many within the established press, as a necessary step in the protection of the standards of truthfulness and accuracy in journalism.

One incident in which journalism could not so easily assume a mantle of purity was the suicide of Pennsylvania state treasurer R. Budd Dwyer. On January 22, 1987 Dwyer, who had been convicted of racketeering and mail fraud, called a news conference. As the TV cameras rolled and the reporters awaited the official's anticipated resignation announcement, Dwyer pulled out a revolver and ended his life. Some of Pennsylvania's television and radio stations broadcast only partial recordings of the event; one TV station ran the entire tape of the suicide. As Matviko (1988) points out, those media outlets that declined to carry the entire suicide took a somewhat holier-than-thou stance regarding the incident.

A poll taken in USA some years ago, confined to 28 editors and 25 public officials and civic leaders, showed that 65 per cent of public representatives concluded that newspapers are not to be trusted because they

carry half-told or misleading stories resulting from lax standards of reportorial research and back grounding of news stories (Mankekar, 1987).

The advancements in new technological photography and tampering with news photographs have raised ethical questions. New computer processes permit editors to alter the content of photographic images. Colours can be controlled and objects or people can be removed from or added to pictures. It is found that non-news magazines freely adjust elements of photographs for the best possible presentation (Shiela Reaves, 1989).

Never before has the Indian press been as much in the news as it is today. Few people have addressed themselves to the central question of a code of ethics. At present journalists operate without any guidelines at all (Vir Singhvi, 1986). The "Fourth Estate" has declined in professional and ethical standards due to its half-baked investigative reporting and poor editing. Journalists are no more as committed to the profession as they used to be.

In today's journalism, news is a glamorous commodity aimed at entertaining you. A media house enjoys a symbiotic relationship with corporate houses. Advertisements and TRPs are the new driving forces of the media industry and no more the social causes are concern. So, let food-grains rot till some corporate house takes up the issue as parts of its "corporate social responsibility" budget! Journalism has become a big business and like any other business and it has embraced consumerism with all its ills (Parvatiyar, 2010).

Ethics is a code of values, which direct our lives, and are thus very vital for moral and healthy life. Ethics mean the analysis of correct conduct, responsible practice, and fair human interactions in the light of the best available principles. Ethics is also about practical judgment-the application of principles to issues and decisions. Ethics encompasses theoretical and practical reasoning. Theoretically, ethics is the analysis of the language of ethics, of forms of ethical reasoning, and of the objectivity of moral principles. Practically, ethics is "applied ethics," the study of principles for such domains as corporate governance, scientific research, and professional practice (Dimock & Tucker, 2004).

In the context of the media, Ethics may be defined as a set of moral principles or values, which guide the conduct of journalism. The first step in the evolution of ethic is a sense of solidarity with other human beings. The ethics are essentially the self-restraint to be practised by the journalists voluntarily, to preserve and promote the trust of the people and to maintain their own credibility and not betray the faith and confidence of the people. The media all over the world has voluntarily accepted that code of ethics should cover at least the following areas of conduct:-

- Honesty and fairness; duty to seek the views of the subject of any critical reportage in advance of publication; duty to correct factual errors; duty not to falsify pictures or to use them in a misleading fashion;
- Duty to provide an opportunity to reply to critical opinions as well as to critical factual reportage;
- Morality and justice;
- Respect for privacy;
- Duty to distinguish between facts and opinion;
- Duty not to discriminate or to inflame hatred on such grounds as race, nationality, religion, or gender; some codes call on the press to refrain from mentioning the race, religion or nationality of the subject of news stories unless relevant to the story; some call for coverage which promotes tolerance;
- Duty not to use dishonest means to obtain information;
- Duty not to endanger people;
- General standards of decency and taste;
- Duty not to prejudge the guilt of an accused and to publish the dismissal of charges against or acquittal of anyone about whom the paper previously had reported that charges had been filed or that a trial had commenced;

A code of ethics for journalists will not, however, be worth the paper on which it is written unless we can graft teeth onto such a code so as to make it enforceable by an appropriate, recognised authority (Mankekar, 1987). The obvious and appropriate authority for that purpose is the Press Council of India, as recommended by the First Press Commission. The Press Council of India is a quasi-judicial body established under the Press Council of India, Act, 1965, with the powers of civil court to guide the press and authorities on matters that may have a bearing on the freedom of the press and maintaining and improving the standards of the newspapers and

news agencies. The very existence of this statutory body stems from the need to ensure that the press is free and independent as well as responsible.

The Second Press Commission too observed that one of the functions entrusted to the press Council was the building up a code of conduct for newspapers, news agencies and journalists in accordance with the high standards of journalism. But in a number of reports, the Press Council preferred to build a code of conduct based on its previous decisions rather than frame a code. The Council claims that attempts at framing an exhaustive code for professional bodies of journalists in various countries, including India, have proved futile or had not proved helpful when it came to applying the principles to individual cases. It is not declaring a code of conduct for journalists as it fears that the government would give it statutory clothing.

The second press commission said that it would not be desirable to draw up a code for ethics for newspapers. Also, 'The Editors Guild of India' refused to draft any code arguing that responsible people do not need such a formal code.

There are many risks inherent in ethical codes (Drechsel, 1987). In "The Case against Mass Media Codes of Ethics," Jay Black and Ralph Barney also offer two major arguments against ethical codes for news reporting. First, each person best develops as an individual and a citizen if he or she is free to obtain whatever information may contribute to that growth. Governmental control of the media, or even self-imposed regulations to which all reporters must comply, limits the flow of such information. Black and Barney's second argument against ethical codes for the news profession emerges from the difference between what they label "moral philosophy" and mere "moralizing". The authors suggest that a genuine moral philosophy evolves within the reporter as that person gains experience. On the other hand, codes merely advise as to the industry's view of what is appropriate behaviour. The codes remove the need for reporters to become what Black and Barney refer to as "professional philosophers" who are capable of making their own decisions about what is right and wrong (Black and Barney, 1985).

If codes of ethics are ineffective means of securing good journalistic practices, what would work better? John C. Merrill offers one answer in the title of his essay, "Good Reporting Can Be a Solution to Ethics Problem". Merrill would set the standard of ethical journalism at simply expecting the reporter to write a good story (Merrill, 1987). Journalists themselves accept this view that objectivity equals ethicality, but they see objectivity as a reasonable goal.

In addition to codes of ethics, many news organizations maintain an in-house ombudsman whose role is, in part, to keep news organizations honest and accountable to the public. The ombudsman is intended to mediate in conflicts stemming from internal and or external pressures, to maintain accountability to the public for news reported, and to foster self-criticism and to encourage adherence to both codified and uncodified ethics and standards.

Hence, at a time when the globalization of Indian economy has brought about drastic change in the mediascape and the Indian press is also going global, the responsibility of the media to safeguard the interest of the people and the nation has increased manifold. With the advent of private TV channels, the media seems to have taken over the reins of human life and society in every walk of life. The media today does not remain satisfied as the Fourth Estate but it has also assumed the foremost importance in society and governance. While playing the role of informer, the media also takes the shape of a motivator and a leader. Such is the influence of media that it can make or unmake any individual, institution or any thought.

Mass media is all pervasive and plays a vital role in dissemination of information. Mass communication is a vital human activity which brings about social change, economic development, political reformation and cultural revolution. With so much power and strength, the media cannot lose sight of its privileges, duties and obligations. Each day journalists gather and relay information to the public through print media, television, the Internet and radio. Media professionals choose to adopt a personal code of conduct, also known as a set of ethics, to guide their decision making processes. Journalists voluntarily follow codes of conduct and ethics. Although not legally mandatory, journalistic codes of conduct strive to keep reporters honest, level-headed and trustworthy while protecting the integrity of their employer.

It is to be respected that our legislation very wisely did not entrust on the council the job of laying down a code of conduct. For ethics cannot be mired down in a strait jacket. From their very nature, these broad principles cannot be treated cast-iron, absolute rules of law, rigidly applicable in all conditions, under all circumstances. These are flexible, general principles, the range, reach and terrain of which are wider than those of law. The authorization behind them is moral and the source of their motive-force is within the conscience of the media person concerned. The pronouncement and directions of the Press Council activate that conscience, and the principles expressed by it, act as lights that lead and guide the journalist along the path of ethical uprightness. Compiled in a compendium titled "Norms of Journalistic Conduct", they act as a reference guide in varying circumstances for the journalists and can certainly deliver an efficient and credible self-regularity mechanism.

IV Conclusions

The “Fourth Estate” has declined in professional and ethical standards as journalists are no more as committed to the profession as they used to be. Journalists have gone berserk and dumped their moral values, which is harming the interests of the society. In today’s journalism, news is a glamorous commodity aimed at entertaining you. Mad rush for money and materialistic assets had forced him to indulge in yellow journalism. A media house enjoys a symbiotic relationship with corporate houses. Advertisements and TRPs are the new driving forces of the media industry and no more the social causes are concern. Role of media is changing from a mission to business. Journalists should voluntarily follow codes of conduct and ethics. These ethics are not in the nature of control on the media but are necessary for fair and objective use of the media for maintaining freedom of speech and expression in true spirit. To enjoy these fundamental rights and privileges, media is mandated to follow certain societal duties and ethics in collecting and disseminating the information e.g. ensuring authenticity of the news, use of restrained and socially acceptable language for ensuring objectivity and fairness in reporting and keeping in mind its cascading effect on the society and on the individuals and institutions concerned. This involved a sensitive balancing act to protect the rights of individuals while exercising the right of expression. Media are indispensable and we cannot imagine life without them. The freedom of the press has to be preserved and protected. Any direct or indirect interference from state, the owner or other sector is violation on its freedom to discharge its duties towards the society. But, if there is no responsibility and no obligation attached to media, its freedom slowly declines away. Journalists ought to act like “angels with information and views” and not like “devils those are out to build media empires on the carcasses of the public”. As the fourth pillar of democracy, the media must command admiration and honour, which in the past it enjoyed in the society. Further, international and national debates, discussions and conferences on communication issues and media ethics should be organised to stimulate journalists, planners, producers, communicators, media agencies, development workers and change agents, governments and private sectors to adopt comprehensive information, communication policies, planning and measures to respond to problems brought out by this moral decay. Thus, media have a responsibility to its readers or viewers and self-regulation is thus the only answer. What more accurate and better way to conclude can be than the words of Mahatma Gandhi, an eminent journalist is his own right, “The sole aim of journalist should be service. The newspaper press is a great power, but just as unchained torrent of water submerges the whole country side and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within”.

References

1. Black, Jay and Ralph Barney. “The Case against Mass Media Codes of Ethics,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1985, 15 p. [ED 259 348]
2. Drechsel, Robert E. “The Legal Risks of Social Responsibility,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1987, 35 p. [ED 282 222]
3. Eason, David L. “On Journalistic Authority: The Janet Cooke Scandal,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, December 1986, 429-47. [EJ 343 549]
4. IGNOU Notes. “Media Ethics and Laws,” 2008, 15-20.
5. Kumar, A. “Mass Communication and Journalism,” Cosmos Bookhive (P) Ltd., Gurgaon 2004, 1-2.
6. Kuthiala, B. K. “Alternate Paradigms for Journalism,” *Media Critique*, July-September, Vol. 4, 2010, 27-30.
7. Mankekar, D.R. “The Illustrated Weekly of India,” 14th February, 1987.
8. Matviko, John. “How Far Do You Go and How Much Do You Show: Pittsburgh Television News Media and the R. Budd Dwyer Suicide,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association, 1988, 18 p. [ED 294 257]
9. Merrill, John C. “Good Reporting Can Be a Solution to Ethics Problem,” *Journalism Educator* 42, Autumn 1987, 27-29. [EJ 357 906]
10. Parvatiyar, Deepak. “Business Journalism or Business of Journalism,” *Media Critique*, July-September, Vol. 4, 2010, 25-26.
11. Reaves, Shiela. “Digital Alteration of Photographs in Magazines: An Examination of the Ethics,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 1989. [ED 310 444]
12. Vir Singhvi. “The Illustrated Weekly of India,” 14th September, 1986.