

Contemporary Media issues and ethics in India

H.S Harsha Kumar

Assistant Professor, Dept of Journalism Government First Grade College Vijayanagar,
Bangalore-40, India

Abstract

Media ethics are a complex topic because they deal with an institution that must do things that ordinary people in ordinary circumstances would not do. Media ethics draw on a range of philosophical principles, including basic media values. The aim and purpose of this paper is to examine problems in the field of media ethics, in order to possibly increase the critical awareness of the effects of this problem. Media has a prominent role to play in modern society. It can bring about radical changes and improve social situations as it influences our social, civil, cultural, political, economic and aesthetic outlook..

Introduction

Media today as a whole involves more than one aspect to be dealt with. Media forms an integral part of the lives of all. The world of media is irrespective of age and outlook as well as regardless of nationality and creed. In the media industry, limitations are limited! The media sector is estimated to be one of the most expansive and booming industries. It is by now absolutely clear that, media persons play the noteworthy job of letting the masses know what is happening round the world and that too within minutes of the outbreak.

Media today is the entity that makes life easier, bridges the gap, fills all voids and makes communication at all levels extremely simple, remarkable and substantial. Yes, at times the media do make use of a little something in order to sensationalize but that small bit of swindle is part of every job definitely. 'The fourth estate' is what journalists are designated as. That indeed leaves little for us to say to what extent the media is indispensable.

Freedom of expression and the right to criticize the Government is given to all Indian citizens as residents of a democratic nation. Media became popular in India in 19th century during British imperialism, and was initially a means of making people aware of the arbitrariness of the British rule. This propelled the nation to progress on the path of Independence. Now however, media has come to be known as the 'Fourth Estate' or 'Fourth Pillar', viewed alongside the three organs of the government. It has become a societal and political force, though its influence has not officially been recognized. In the media industry, limitations are limited. The Government does have certain provisions to control this fast growing sector, such as the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI) and the News and Broadcasting Authority (NBA), but these have self – created laws which do not play their roles with as much efficacy as we would desire.

In a democratic country like India, the ultimate power lies with the people. But a democratic society needs vigilant and informed people who are able to see through the gimmicks of political parties and politicians. Media creates such valuable citizens. Besides, media has done much good to society by exposing various scams, scandals, frauds, embezzlements and many other cases of corruption leading to initiation of enquiries and other processes of prosecution against the perpetrators of these crimes.¹ Media provides all the useful information to the masses of India. In a way, it keeps a check on the governmental policies, giving reasonable power to the public. Contemporary media is available in almost all forms possible – internet, radio, television, newspapers and magazines. It stores, disseminates, and even controls all sorts of news and data nowadays. The media has the leverage of manipulating information and deciding how much, and in what form the news reaches the people.

The youth undoubtedly forms a fundamental part of a civilization which is evidenced by the fact that more often than not it is the youth that leads a protest against any objectionable act of the government or social institution.¹ Youth's association with media is an integral one. The youngsters make proper use of the media in order to question and condemn corruption, ill doings and malevolence. Nowadays, newspapers have special sections which hoist the voice of the young minds. The same is applied by the television news channels, while the latest platform is the internet. Today, blogging is also a powerful tool that is utilized fully for expressing thoughts, views and disagreements.

Hence, media has proved to restore faith in the democratic nature and the free will of the citizens of India. Through media, the commonality does not only remain constantly upbeat with the events of the world but has also found another way to participate in the decision making process. The chosen representatives have become more accountable and answerable to the public.³ Therefore, contemporary media is providing India the opportunity to evolve and refine herself to keep up with the rest of the world.

Media Ethics: A Paradox:

The explosive growth of both print and electronic media, their ability to shape public opinion, and the fierce competition for TRPs has made the term 'media ethics' a mere paradox. The fundamental premise on which the ethics are based theoretically is impartial observation, and not as the observed. But as we see all around us, media is not just an observer but a skewed opinion maker. Moreover, the recent trend has transcended the selling out of media to pure sensationalism. Shamefully, the real issues of real people have got lost somewhere in these blaring headlines and loud pulp fiction known as news.¹¹

Should the government have the power to curb the media in the face of a pandemic? As the casualty count from the corona virus grows, this is a question India faces. In an established democracy like United States, this would be too banal to bear repeating. India, however, is passing through uncertain times. Earlier this week, the central government has approached the Supreme Court in an attempt to "prevent fake and inaccurate reporting whether intended or not" which could "cause panic in the society".

This followed reports of migrant workers in the thousands streaming out of cities on foot amidst the country's during the lockdown to slow the spread of the virus.²

While urging the media to “maintain a strong sense of responsibility”, the Supreme Court wisely declined to interfere with a free discussion of the pandemic. Nonetheless, the government's move raises an issue worth discussing. In a time of fear and foreboding, might it make sense to rein in journalists?

In the freedom of its media India, like many countries, falls somewhere in between the US and China. India is not an authoritarian country, but it is increasingly a democracy with quasi-authoritarian characteristics. The prime minister hands down pronouncements from up high. No reporter dares to interrogate him the way their American counterparts grill President Donald Trump almost every day. If you point out weaknesses in India's fight against the virus – for instance, relatively sparse testing – a social media lynch mob immediately descends upon you.²

For those who believe the current situation demands more of the policeman's stick, the reporter's pen is part of the problem. They expect journalists to act as cheerleaders for the government, taking each claimed success in the fight against the virus at face value, posing no awkward questions, keeping public morale high by downplaying gloomy prognoses. In this view, the media's role is not to question the government, but to work shoulder to shoulder with it at a time of crisis.

The media is playing the role of the mirror which reflects the time and society we live in. Media can make or break one's image. Because of globalization, a common man is able to know what is happening in the globe sitting at his home. He can understand, analyze, interpret and form an opinion with the help of media. Thus, media has a tremendous impact on society. In such a scenario, the social responsibility of the media becomes more important. But these days sensationalism has become a fashion. News channels and news papers intentionally present information in a way that is intended to excite or shock people. Sensationalism is the biggest drawback of today's media, a cheap tool of gain TRP.

That the idea of the media as a lapdog rather than a watchdog would appeal to those in power should come as no surprise. But in these uncertain times this appears to appeal to many ordinary Indians as well. In the public imagination, journalism as a profession seems to have lost much of its moral sheen.

Some of the cardinal issues which the media policy, according to communication experts, must address are as follows:

1. The freedom of information—the right of the public to know and the obligation of the government to inform them. The biggest hurdle in attaining this goal is the outdated Official Secrets Act, enacted by the British in 1923. Yet , bureaucrats and those in uniform are still treating security as a holy cow and convenient cover-up for all misdoings.

2. The next issue concerns journalistic ethics, which has evoked tremendous media outcry. The media considers a code of ethics as infringement of its freedom and dignity. Government should keep itself aloof from this controversy and allow the media to evolve its own code.

3. The question of censorship. Given the short duration of most present day war and conflict situations within the country, it is both undesirable and unenforceable. It would also be counterproductive, as it turned out at Tsrar-e-Sharif.²⁰ Self-censorship, as tried out successfully in Israel and to a large extent in Vietnam, could be effective so long as the media is well aware of the "stop list" of subjects pertaining to its professional work.

4. Professional and broad-based training for journalists , since "niche-journalism" is the order of the day. Mostly, journalism today has become specialised and as such there is an urgent need to organise subject-specific journalism training through either a revamped Press Council or some other relevant body.

Conclusion:-

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 journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power; but just as unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside 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". In 21st century, the proportion of media content including that of New Media is predominantly of entertainment. Such uneven content generation has made it detrimental to the catering of different ethos of various communities, the populace, marginalized groups, socially downtrodden and so on.

We have not, so far, tracked down what is meant by speaking of journalism as a profession, except in so far ethical practices is necessary but not sufficient for the profession, but this should be of little concern as it is the ethical practice and not the designation 'profession' that is important. Journalism ethics are necessary for every media agency to follow as those ethics forms the base towards the moral and social responsibility of the media, but unfortunately in today's time many of the media agencies whether it is print or electronic media rarely follows it due to some temptations of raising TRP's or getting into the international market, but at some of point of time they are skipping the base that is to follow the ethics. Imagine, for a moment, a raging pandemic in India without credible journalists to verify the facts. Rumors would become the only information available. Amidst the uncertainty, fears would grow. The panic in society that any government rightly fears, would be much worse without trusted facts to counter it.

Everyone should wish India well in its war against corona virus. But if the media is doing its job properly expect a diet of gloom and doom, not of sunny optimism and good cheer.

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