



ETHICS AND MASS MEDIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Indian Media is exploding day by day. Circulations of Newspapers and Magazine are surging. TV channels focused on news are witnessing unprecedented growth. Community radio stations and frequency modulated radio stations are on the horizon. Internet news portals are recording a good number of hits reaching out to audiences like never before. The technological development from printing to Internet, from pinhole camera to digital equipment, from gramophone to blue ray discs and from telegraph to mobile phones have changed every possible dimension of human communication and in the process is affecting changes in values and ethics.

All this has made Indian media a highly competitive industry providing a plethora of choices to media buyers and marketers. However this media growth is not painless. There have been casualties too. The biggest one is that of Journalism values. Media ethics is one of the new branches of applied ethics in a democratic society. 'This professional ethics, concerned with a whole range of social issues such as – honesty and integrity in media coverage, objectivity, freedom of speech and expression, the media law, political influence, warfare and terrorism special conditions and national interests, issues connected with sexual or racial bias or stereotyping, the weighing of individual privacy against public interest, and censorship' (Thompson, 2002).

Corruption in the mass media in India and elsewhere is as old as the media itself. But in recent times it has gone way beyond individuals and specific media organizations from planting information and spinning views in lieu of favors received in cash or kind to institutionalized and organized forms of corruption wherein newspapers and TV channels receive funds for publishing or broadcasting information. They sought to be disguised as 'news' but are actually designed to favor particular individuals, corporate entities, representatives of political parties or rich candidates contesting elections.

Ethics: A philosophical perspective

The ancient Indian concept of personal growth was not confined to material growth. It was a holistic and integrated growth concept based on attainment of the Purusharthas: Dharma, Artha, Kama, Mokhsa. One cannot be sacrificed to other. Mackenzie, (1975) says 'ethics is concerned with action it is sometimes being characterized as a practical science. Ethics deals with the general conditions involved in the rightness or goodness of conduct'. William Lillie, (1975) define Ethics, as 'the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies, a science that



judges this conduct to be right or wrong, to be good or bad’.

Plato had told that ‘the leader of the nation must necessarily be a philosopher’. A thought comes that even the persons heading media and at least some of senior persons working in media should necessarily be thoughtful philosophers, if not philanthropists. Plato discussed in his *The Republic* that the virtuous (journalist) is one who has respect for and tries to live by, the cardinal virtues: Wisdom - gives direction to the moral life, Knowledge, abilities, experience. Courage- keep one constantly pursuing his goal, Temperance - which gives harmony, moderation and proportion to moral life, Justice - equal treatment, man’s social relations, Truth – facts, the authenticity of the information, (Ahuja, 1988). Kant’s ethical practical philosophy is held that “man must heed the voice of duty as an incontestable law, he must abide by the commands of his conscience, even if they are contrary to his material interests, such as promotion at work, conclusion of a profitable deal, etc”.(Kirilenko, Korshunova, 1985).

Ethics: Media Professionals perspective

Media has a responsible duty to play a vital role in building a universal harmonious global society. Benjamin Franklin a senior Journalist and Media educator noted in 1729 ‘We love the handsome, we applaud the learned, and we fear the rich and powerful, but we worship and adore the virtuous’ The attainment of virtuous conduct is an ancient concern for journalists as ethical dilemmas have plagued the profession since Franklin’s days. Joseph Pulitzer (Vidura, 2005) rightly pointed out that ‘without high ethical ideals, a newspaper not only is stripped of its splendid possibilities for public service, but many become a positive danger to the community’.

Lambeth, (1998) said that ‘the debate ranges over why journalists’ ethical decision making goes wrong, whether they are capable of doing it well, and how to improve it. Since the 1970s, journalism has been occupied with its own ‘ethics movement’ – media ethics courses have tripled, and ethics is a staple at annual conferences and in academic and professional literature’.

Paid news: A secrete advertisement

In 2009 Maharastra assembly elections in India, the same story appeared in three rival dailies word for word only the headline differed in one. It was bylined in *Pudhari*, attributed to ‘special correspondent’ in *Lokmat*, and went without a byline in the *Maharashtra Times*. ‘*Lokmat* is a very popular Marathi daily newspaper. It ranks as the 5th largest circulated daily in India’ (ABC 2009). *The Maharashtra Times* is no small town sheet either. It too has millions of readers and is part of India’s largest newspaper group Times of India. If Indian language papers ran most of such ‘news’, that was mainly because they were the preferred platform to reach voters during election time. Mr. Chief Minister seems to have gained greatly from what is now called ‘package journalism’ or ‘coverage packages’. The CM dismissed the allegations and suggested that a few lazy journalists may have been responsible for



reproducing press releases verbatim.

P.Sainadh pointed out that on polling day Vidarbha Plus a supplement of The Times of India carried an advertisement disguised as news on the Congress candidate, Raosaheb Shekhawat, son of President Pratibha Patil, from Amravati assembly constituency. There were many complaints against Hindi daily Dainik Jagran, the largest circulated daily newspaper in India and among the five most widely circulated dailies in the world. PCI received complaints against Dainik Bhaskar, the second highest circulated daily, Lokmat, Marathi daily, Hindustan, Punjab Kesari, Eenadu Sakshi and also against the largest circulated English daily in the country the Times of India, among others.

PCI, member Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, (2010) said that 'the leader guards the reader but in this instance the leaders themselves took the lead in cheating the reader and lowering ethical standards'. In this regard, Kuldip Nayar (2011) as accomplished Indian senior journalist observed that 'charges of paid news were also made during the 2004 Lok Sabha election. But then the quantum of payment was small and the number of newspapers and TV channels involved limited. This time it seems there has been a free for all. Names of leading newspapers and TV channels are hawked about in bazaars'.

There was a seminar in Delhi about the allegations that during the Lok Sabha elections both the print and electronic media not only took money from political parties and candidates, but also extorted as much as they could. Kapil Sibal, HRD Minister who inaugurated the session, contended that 'they' knew how the stories were planted and paid for. Several journalists also admitted that a lot of money changed hands during the election campaign. Nothing came out of the seminar even a word about the seminar or Sibal's allegation in newspapers or television. Some approached the Press Council of India (PCI) to set up a committee to go into the slush money used during campaign. In July 2009, a two member sub-committee of the Press Council of India, was constituted to examine the phenomenon of paid news and submitted its report in April 2010 after meeting people in different parts of the country. PCI's report has been suppressed because of vested interests. The Election Commission was also tapped to find its response.

Levels of corruption in paid news

First level: The candidates contesting elections do not disclose the true expenditure incurred on campaigning, thereby violating the conduct of election rules 1961 which have been framed and are meant to be enforced by the election commission under the representation of the people Act 1951.

Second level: The News papers and TV channels concerned typically receive funds in cash and do not disclose such earnings in their company balance sheets or official



statements of accounts. Thus, by not accounting for the money received from candidates, the media company concerned or its representatives are violating the provisions of the Companies Act, 1956 as well as the Income Tax Act 1961 among other laws.

Third level: Ultimately the reader or viewers deceived into believing that what is essentially an advertisement is, in fact independently produced news content.

Reasons for paid news

1. Ownership pattern in media

Before independence, all newspapers worked together with service motto for specific goals, social change, national development, and attaining independence from British colonial rule. After independence, business became its main motto. Now a days family owned concerns dominate the Indian media. It leads to cross media ownership. Cross media ownership leads to monopoly. Mrinal Pande, Prasara Bharati chairperson expressed that 'it is important to question the ownership pattern in the Indian media. The boundaries between the editor and the owner are blurring and in some instances ownership is also in political hands'(Dec 4, 2010 The Hindu).

2. Pressure to raise advertisement revenue

Francis Williams (quoted by Rusbridger in his interview on 20 Sep 2010), studied the press in 1950s, and said that 'it was advertising that set the press free originally. Up to that point governments were paying for newspapers and taking advertising liberated the press. It would be dangerous now if we became so reliant on advertisers that we began to loss freedom that it had given us.

Ethical model in developing country

Noam Chomsky (Nov 2010, Outlook) observed that, *La Journda* the second largest newspaper in Mexico, is very high quality newspaper. It gets almost no commercial advertising because the government hates it, business hates it. They survive on readership support. Because, People in poor country Mexico, trust *La Jornada*'.

Un-ethical model in western country

Concept of News Hole: In USA, The New York Times may be the world's greatest news paper have the concept of 'News Hole'. That means they first lay out where the advertisement is going to be, in the afternoon when they plan for the following day's news paper. Then put the news in the gaps between the advertisements. The reason is detriments are an important part of a newspaper.

Concept of content and fill: The content is advertising the fill is progammes you put in to try to keep the viewers watching in between the advertisements.

Replying to question on paid news, Alan Rusbridger (Sep 19, 2010 Hindu) Editor of The Guardian, emphasized that newspapers would have to retain the trust of



the readers. If they behave less than honorably, they will knock down. They will stand exposed with the spread of social networking sites'. Gandhi (Indian Opinion 1912) being a Journalist said that 'advertisements are inserted by people who are impatient to get rich, in order that they may gain over their rivals'.

Sainath P, (2009) expressed his anguish that 'If it was news, the reports have compiled must rank amongst the most remarkable news judgments ever. If this was advertising, why was it not clearly marked as such? If it was not advertising, then it was 'paid news' a term now firmly embedded in the media lexicon. If it was paid news then both media outlets and politicians are guilty of much more than financial wrongdoing. They would have to answer for the profound damage done to the democratic processes.

Manipulation. Manipulation of the news story for the institutional and personal benefits is morally and ethically not correct. Some of the journalists exploit their profession for personal gains. 'It is no secret that the columns of news papers are being misused to woo prospective employers and secure attractive offers by planting favorable stories and killing negative ones' (Gautham Machaiah, 2006). Issues today have to be dressed up in ways certified by the corporate media. They have to be justified not by their importance to the public but by their acceptability to the media, their owners and sponsors.

Lies. As far as Lies are concerned, Immanuel Kant's Philosophy says that any lie from any reason, however noble, is immorality and destroys a person's dignity. A Journalist's job is to report facts even though they may be inconvenient to some. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized the need for truth in expression 'When the truth is greater than the Sun, some day or other it will come to light'. We must always so speak and act as to express as clearly as possible what we believe to be true, or what we intend to perform and that having expressed our meaning we must as far as possible conform our actions to it.

Nira Radia episode

Journalists, Industrialists and politicians are back bone to the country's development. The issue of taped conversation between Nira Radia, Mukesh Ambani and Ratan Tata with interest of ministerial portfolios raises questions the boundary between legitimate news gathering, lobbying and influence peddling. About 104 phone conversations recorded between May and June 2009, when the Manmohan Singh government was in the process of beginning its second innings.

In a fierce debate on 'Radia tapes and Journalistic ethics' on 3rd December at New Delhi, Rajdeep Sardesai President of the Editors Guild, took back his words, promising immediate intervention by the Guild in formulating a code of ethics for journalists, including for editors. But he admitted that media groups needed to look inward and seriously examine where they had gone wrong in allowing the blurring of



lines separating journalism, politics and lobbying. Vinod Meheta, said that 'journalists are supposed to use sources, sources cannot use journalists' (Hindu 4th Dec, 2010).

Kuldip Nayar (2011) expressed that 'the media in Gandhian times did sustain the spirit of sacrifice that had consecrated the freedom movement. The value system motivated the press. Integrity was the strength of the press'. Majority of people trust the journalists more than the police, politician, and lawyers and believe that they could articulate their grievances. Press is called the Fourth Estate because it is one of the strongest pillars on which the democratic edifice rests. But those days are fading away. Nayar admitted that journalists in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had more gumption than the people in our media.

Need to revive Code of Ethics

To guide, advice and to counsel media persons, several national and international media associations have prepared codes of ethics to guideline for ethical journalistic practice in the profession. Codes of ethics can help newsroom staffers make sound decisions and build journalism credibility about the many ethical problems they may encounter in their work. Media should have a concrete policy on building ethical values, checking ethical values, and enhancing ethical values for the harmonious development of emerging age of the global society. It is in need to formulate a media policy in formation of a vibrant civil society, to create a movement to resist the onward march of corporate globalization and emergence of giant mega media conglomerates.

Conclusion

There was a time when the media acted as a watchdog of democracy. Today, true journalism has become a rarity. Media ethics became an oxymoron now days, which means it is a phrase that combines two apparently contradictory ideas. The image of the journalist in India has taken quite a battering. The media have a significant role in formulating public opinion, but it has consistently ignored people's social issues facing the nation such as poverty, corruption, health, education and raging communalism and concentrating only on news that increases readership and viewership. Customized and profit-oriented journalism have come to replace spirited journalism. If the fourth estate has lost its exalted position, it is because of a paradigm shift in the priorities of reporting, driven by corporate interests. Many sections have a clear corporate agenda, for which they create news and do a partisan analysis based on false information. This tendency is stronger in the regional press. Language is the lens through which journalists report to the public on news developments. All too often, journalists get their lens, their language, from the corporate and government authority or their own national allegiances.

Both print and the visual media are giving a go-by to journalistic ethics and all that matters is sensationalism. Most of the newspapers are on political issues, followed by entertainment and sports sponsored by big corporation. Some of the newspapers TVs are meant to satisfy the personal agenda of VIPs. A very small section is devoted



to significant achievements in different sectors. Sensationalism is the order of the day and even the most ordinary incidents are blown out of proportion. Journalists must take responsibility for their action lest they should remain citizens with rights and responsibilities. They should be sensitive and caring people and they should have an implicit contract with their audience to present a reliable, balanced and constructive picture of the world. Media policy must give the importance to development communication. Media should keep ethical values and serve more as a social agent than as a vehicle of entertainment.

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