



## **MEDIA AND ETHICS**

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For a long time democracy of media and ethics has been debated. Media the fourth estate plays a crucial role in our democracy. A vibrant, energetic and free press keeps the government on its mettle. Free press does not mean an unchecked press. Freedom to hold others to account must be combined with self-responsibility and self -regulation. Unlike lawyers and doctors, journalists are not trained in areas of ethics. Media ethics is not offered as a course, no training is given to media professional to help them take sound ethical decisions. Journalists examine their actions on the basis of professional and personal standards. Most journalists try to work ethically, distinguishing between right and wrong. But a long there is some audience who criticizes their decision. They criticize media for being too critical, reporting too much bad news, too sensational, too big, powerful, arrogant and insensitive. The media must maintain its credibility for the sake of business. It need audience---consumers for products to sell advertisements and also because people depend on media for information. By no means access of information universal; nor is affordable to the vast majority of the word's population. The pace of globalization has posed a great challenge to our media industry. In the wake of globalization media has also grown up, unfortunately not quality wise. It is becoming insensitive and profit driven catering to public demand. Ethical enquiry seems to be crucial for all media professionals.

Issue of ethics has been debated since the time of Socrates. Ethics is considered as a code of conduct, a morality, a system of principles, values and rule of life giving guidance on what is wrong or right, a good or bad. Ethics, are rules of behavior, specifically refers to the application of rational thought and moral choices. Generally there are three levels of ethics, Meta ethics, and normative and applied ethics. Meta ethics are fundamental cultural values, what is good and what is fair. We question is to ourselves. Normative ethics are related to moral behavior. These are evolved by various media organizations on their own for their media practitioners. Applied ethics implies that media professional must be loyal to the interest of the organization for which they



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work .The vastness of media industry and its increasing globalization may suggest that it is impossible to apply general principles to all of them.

Media is partly a product of Globalization. Globalization has brought satellite television channels which through modern technology tools tries to access more and more viewers. E- paper has embraced Print and electronic media in itself. Media world has thus changed radically. With media grown larger and mass based, its role has changed from providing information to entertainment. From entertainment now it has been shifted to commerce. Technology enabled connectivity in mobility, to stay connected while being on the move. E -commerce is now capturing the masses. All these makes the issue of ethics very complicated .No media can afford to go against the sentiments of its viewers. No news can afford to go against the wishes of its readers.

Mass media makes money in direct proportion to the number of viewers and readers it allures. The higher the rating, the higher is the price for selling advertisements. Multinational corporations globally manufacture the goods and services, the world consumes, global investment bankers forge mergers and acquisitions, global advertising firms market the goods and the global corporate media disseminates culture needed for product and services to thrive. Profit is the sole motive. Instead of serious analyses, rumor- mongering and sensationalization is preferred as it is easier to do. Such entertainment is magnetic and media becomes opium. Serious journalism does not seem to be profitable hence distortions and flaws of any kind are not reported at all. Sensational stories are often chased and over covered, as they are exciting but not important. Serious stories are considered boring and old fashioned and therefore killed by editors and media owners. Newspapers are full of news of violence, murder, robbery and crime. Food and fashion takes the prime importance. Reader seems to be hijacked from primitive to fine culture. Channels on TV have increased in number but their standards have drastically declined. Technical excellence is followed by cultural degradation. Television has become an instrument of mass distraction, rampant consumerism and casual sex. Dialogues in television are full of vulgarity, obscenity, violence and bloodshed in visuals. The message passed to the children is that drinking, smoking and drugs is fashion and glamorous, Gang wars and eve teasing are common in school and colleges, teachers are funny creatures and police officers are butts of ridicule, music albums provide sexual excitement. Critiques' to these are called culture cops. I agree with American TV comedian Mary when he said TV is educational in the sense when TV is switched on at home I go to the other room and study. Throughout the world television dominates the life of children. It promotes and justifies violence, aggression and anti-social



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behavior. Preoccupations of rich are amplified and those of poor are ignored. Expectations of the children are raised when they see their stars living in luxury apartments, owning big cars and paid exorbitant salaries. They are glamour struck and become oblivious to the realities of life. When real life failed to match their expectations they get disoriented.

Misleading, exaggerated or false advertisements making false claims have become a routine rather than an exception. An advertisement is published like news in the newspaper and then in a small corner in the end is written 'Advt'. Using the sir names of a leader or a celebrity and printing it for the news of a common man having the same sir name, claiming particular AC releasing Vitamin C or certain neo plasma plus technology of an AC is effective against bird flue or advertising dirt free tiles or lifetime validity offer by mobile company, drinks making you taller, certain treatment gives you new skin in five days, VLCC weight loss advertisement claiming weight loss of 82 kg, Samsung TV good for body also (besides eyes) have become common. One wonders whether it is time to cry for halt. Worse is even consumer do not protest for these false advertisements or file a PIL. Rival companies go to courts not for ethics but for sheer business interests. Consumers are taken for ride. Media also unhesitatingly oblige them. It is the time to ponder over the issue seriously and impose self- restraints and self- regulation. It is high time that we have some restraining measures in broadcast. TV channels themselves need to follow certain restraints on their own as responsibility with certain do's and don'ts.

It is the responsibility of journalists not merely to give what the audience wants but to inform the public accurately so that they can make intelligent choices, which in turn will help the corporate, and government to rectify them. A responsible news paper always debate whether a story they are carrying is in public interest and whether it would be to a section of readers. What is in the public interest may not be in the corporate interest<sup>1</sup>. Public interest is impossible to quantify. According to Hoynes "an informed citizenry is assumed to be better for democracy than an ignorant one"<sup>2</sup>. Self-discipline is the answer to those who are shunning from responsible journalism. In a democratic system, Press has the greater responsibility of informing the people regarding all socio political advancement. A journalist has to act as a communicator and not mediator. There is yawning gap between the information-rich and information-poor, and this gap is growing, as the cost of access is nowhere getting any easier or cheaper. According to one estimate, in 1996, 64% of all hosts in the world were in America; 17% in Western Europe; four percent in Asia; Eastern Europe, Africa, and Central and South America accounted for one percent each.<sup>3</sup> So it is equally important that media remain independent from and beyond the authority of government. This is considered to be central to the operation of democracy. Media



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facilitate a smooth functioning of democracy at best but not beyond its capacity. It cannot eliminate the in built flaws of the democracy itself.

Prescribing a code of ethics for the media is a tricky one. In a democratic country any such thing by law will not only arouse resentment but also give a cause to the media, perhaps oppose it vehemently. Media is likely to point back to government. So first thing is to eliminate scams, kickbacks, and corruption. Though free press is an important feature of democracy but no one likes exposure. Free press is threatened, tempted, lured, and harassed as and when required.

But there is no consensus on what comprises good and ethical journalism. Media has as many supporters as it has detractors, who consider it arrogant, insensitive, biased, inaccurate and sensational. They feel that stories are fixed or partially broken. Sting operations are also considered unethical. Those in power feel that media create controversies by looking into their private lives. Journalists adopt different strategies for ethical decisions within the same type of situations. A decision can be ethical but not necessarily illegal or something can be legal but not ethical for e.g. legally there is no wrong in publishing the name of a rape victim but it is not considered ethical. Ethics deals with distinguishing between right and wrong. Codes are needed for all type of contents---news, advertisement, serials, music etc. Such ethical practice implies distinguishing desirable from what is not. Public need to be reminded of long term implications of television. It also promotes social envy and family discontent. In case of news channels self-regulation is more desirable. But over regulation is also not good.

Media represents the public opinion to influence government decision and policy. It is unethical on the part of journalist to hold back information that gives insight into the functioning of the government. Press remains the ultimate authority to testify the accountability of a democratic government to the people. Media must provide informed opinion and not opium to the masses. In America there is a regulatory commission for almost every service sector. In India also we have various regulation commission but they have an independent status. In some countries self-regulation exist. For e.g. almost all EU members' states have it, others have developed national code beyond the basic code. In general detailed legislation works best for self -regulation. But then the question of enforcement comes. Most effective means of enforcement would be media refusing to offending advertisement. This requires commitment. No legislative provisions are good enough if not backed by larger public concerns and initiatives. Satellite channels are beyond the regulation of any government. Appointment of various committees in India such as Chanda Committee, Vardan Committee, VergheseCommitte, Prasar Bharti Bill etc. only will not help in meeting the challenge of Globalization. Advertisement for liquor and tobacco are banned



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on Indian Doordarshan and most other Asian television networks. But the Hong Kong based satellite channel has begun showing advertisement of different brands of liquor and pan masalas. There is little concern for ethics of advertising, or for that matter, with the ethics of broadcasting. The TV viewer has to take it or leave it.

Self-regulatory initiative works better with some outside regulatory mechanism supported by legislative provisions. It is expected that media should observe certain standards of objectivity, responsibility and responsiveness. In a democracy certain equilibrium is expected between relationships and responsibilities of various pillars of democracy. Along with certain responsibility and accountability there should be some concern for consequences of what is being broadcast, on the basic value systems like freedom, objectivity, plurality, privacy, equity and ethics. However this does not mean the curbing of freedom of media. But facts must be published after proper verification and presented with due caution and restraint in a manner that is conducive to the reaction of an atmosphere congenial to communal harmony, amity and peace. Sensational, provocative and alarming headlines are to be avoided. Absolute commercialization, price wars trial by media has brought down the quality, responsibility and accountability of a section of media. Therefore at present the emergence of regulation of media has become more relevant.

There are many challenges with respect to ethics in the age of media globalization. Firstly, the code of ethics is not sufficient. Secondly, the codes need to be constantly reevaluated. Thirdly, there is no clarity who is a friendly nation and who is not. Fourthly, codes are incomplete, in content. Where journalists are often paid poorly, where there is rampant corruption in media and government and where there is little accountability of media owners and proprietors, ethics ends up last on the checklist. Attempts to draw up a code of ethics for journalists in India have so far drawn blank. The codes alone cannot solve every problem. Situation are too numerous and diverse. Every journalist will face different situation in different organization.

Globalization has all the awful affects on our society. Political and social power is taking on new dimensions. Cultural awareness and misunderstandings are growing. Journalism is at the centre of these changes. The media has to face the challenge of working in the new global society. Culturally there is increasing onus on the media and journalism to explain differences and similarities between people and societies. The complex field of media in the era of globalization has created intricate ethical issues. To deal with the new issues we have to carefully generate new ethics and parameters for regulating media who will strengthen the freedom of media and right to freedom of speech and expression of people.



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Media must introspect and reconnect with people and rediscover itself. Media the world over has acquired maturity and it knows its limitations and duties. It is learning to follow certain well-established traditions in journalism and is very judicious in guarding the national interest. In India media has a huge responsibility to fight against corruption, inefficiency, illiteracy, social and economic weaknesses besides promoting national integration and economic development. It has played a great role in the pre independence days, during emergency and no reason not to play in future. Its role in keeping people informed and educated had been laudable. The observance of ethics is excellent for maintaining freedom, integrity and dignity of media. Ethics does matter. It is through ethical dialogues that we can promote media literacy education that sees the public as an active contributor who can bring change to a media culture rather than as helpless victims of a globalization. In a welfare state it is the responsibility of the government to protect the youth from exploitation of the ruthless commercial forces, when the media fails to adopt voluntarily a code of conduct in public interest.

### References

- 1 Croteau, David. William Hoynes. The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest. Pine Forge press California.2001.pp-7
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Quoted in Colin Sparks; 'Newspapers, the Internet And Democracy', in Javnost/The Public, vol.iii (1996), 3, p53