



Media Ethics: Different Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper proposes to explain the role of media as the 'Fourth Estate of the Government'. An Attempt has been made to bring different perspectives of ethics which comprises views of Aristotle, Machiavelli, Immanuel Kant, J S Mill, Rawls and Mahatma Gandhi. The paper focuses on Press Ethics. Press ethics' reflects the society and the regulations that shape the press system. The ethical standards and the code of conduct media practitioners should actually abide by is an ongoing debate. The responsibility of the press has changed along with the changing role of the government and its relationship with the people. The role media ought to play has been emphasized, where in the views of Markandey Katju, Chairman ,Press Council of India (PCI) has been incorporated and the role of PCI in regulating media has been discussed therein. At the end of the paper, scant mention of the media council has also been made.

Keywords: Media, media ethics, democracy, news, journalistic standards, freedom of press, constitution of india, press council of india, social responsibility.

Introduction

Media without which it is difficult to lead a civilized life on earth have played and is playing a significant role in man's life. It acts as a disseminator of information and a channel of communication between people and the government. Its role in the policy process is worth appreciating. Media educates people by providing wealth of information related to socio-cultural and politico-economic aspects of the society. In a democracy it has been entrusted with the task of educating the people about rights and creating awareness on various serious issues and problems concerning the society. It helps in bringing the marginalized sections of the society to the mainstream. As Brian Mc Nair (quoted in Richard Keeble's, *The Newspaper Handbook*) points out that news is not alone the account of what is happening in and around the world but it also consists of significant beliefs and notions¹. Media's role in the public sphere in moulding public opinion, structuring public debate and making the government answerable to the people is commendable. It provides a communication link between individuals and groups². The innovations in media technology have made the world a global village. Historian Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59) put forward the idea that 'media 'acts as the 'Fourth Estate' of the government. It acts as a check on abuses of power both by government and professionals. Media acts as the defender of public by safeguarding them against excesses of the public officials³. Since the middle of 15th century, press has acquired different roles, from a servant of the state, as the protector of liberty against the government, as one of regulating organization of the community (fourth estate) to a socially responsible press⁴.

Dan Laughey defines Media as technologies that spread the messages to masses in different parts of a region, country and the world⁵. From time immemorial, the Print media has been disseminating information about social and political events to the public. The Roman Acta Diurna is said to be the ancient newspaper existing around 59 B.C. The first modern newspaper was a European invention. In India the first newspaper Bengal Gazette was started in 1780 by James Augustus Hicky⁶.

Methodology

The methodology used in the paper is philosophical and analytical. Secondary sources like books, journals and newspaper articles both print and online have been made use of in the study. The paper focuses on different perspectives of media ethics at the national and international level and at the same time the paper focuses on the relationship between media and the people which by itself evaluates media's performance and freedom enjoyed by the media.

Media Ethics: Ethics have been defined variedly. The term 'Ethics' comes from the Greek word '*ethos*' meaning 'custom' or 'usage' or 'character'. It is a systematic study of general principles of right or wrong behaviour⁷. It implies the application of the moral principles to the issues concerning the society⁸.

The word 'ethics' has philosophical considerations. *Aristotle*, the Greek philosopher based his concept of ethics on the 'Golden Mean' which according to him is the midpoint between extremes i.e., their professional needs and those of the society. *Machiavelli* explains the word 'ethics' by way of two related but distinct notions, means and ends. According to him ends

justifies means, for instance, if the end is to defend the state, then the means used to protect it like war and other related instruments stand ethical. In 1700s Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher developed the idea of categorical imperative. Here 'categorical' means unconditional. According to him, one should develop such principles that will hold good both for himself and the society at large. Kant's ideas have been used in the development of media ethics. Press freedom and the public's right to know can be regarded as universal principles. J.S. Mill, an English philosopher of 1800s called it "Greatest Happiness Principle, ethical behavior according to him is that which is useful to the society at large. For utilitarian's, Aristotle's golden mean and Machiavelli's end justifies means stands right only if those principles promote the greatest good of the greatest number of people⁹. The utilitarian principle holds good in the light of happiness and bad in course of its reverse¹⁰. Rawl's, a modern American philosopher opines that everybody must be treated equally without any regard for economic and social status. He need to treat the rich the same way as the poor, the famous person the same way as the layman on the street¹¹.

These philosophical considerations would help us to understand the concept of 'media ethics.'

Media while presenting information to the masses are expected to maintain ethical standards as their way of reporting directly or indirectly affects the lives of the masses. According to Kasoma, in the African context, "Media ethics refers to making sound moral decision in journalistic work which finds its place in societal morality". (quoted in *Journalism* by Goretti Nassanga, Linda)¹² George Rodman, in his book *Making Sense of Media-An Introduction to Mass Communication* says that Media ethics, more than being a kind of technology, it deals with the nature of human beings.

Throughout the world, the press system of one country differs from the other, similarly do the ethical standards. Press ethics' reflects the society and the regulations that shape the press system. The ethical standards and the code of conduct media practitioners should actually abide by is an ongoing debate. The responsibility of the press has changed along with the changes in the role of the government and its relationship with the people. Earlier the press provided the basic information needed by the people. But as the functions of the government are on increase, the responsibility of the press has shifted from mere providing information to sorting out information and presenting a balanced report¹³. The aim of press is to report the facts, interpret it and play a catalyst role in solving the problems of the society¹⁴. There are a few fundamental ethical standards which most people agree like accuracy, fairness, balance, truth and objectivity. Certain standards can be imposed through agreements among professionals to behave in a certain way, punish certain behaviours and by educating them in moral reasoning that help them and organization to make decision about how to handle specific situations. In fact many media organizations set forth certain code of ethics to standardize their

employee's behavior and to safeguard themselves against increased government regulation. The guidelines will remind the employees that the ethical standards are important to maintain credibility and profit. Freebies and junkets, sensationalism, indecency are considered as some of the unethical standards¹⁵. Whether electronic or print media the content ranges from conservatism to extra-sensationalism. (Yellow Journalism)¹⁶. Media Ethicist, Clifford Christians says, "Moral thinking is a systematic process: a judgment is made and action taken. Moral decisions made by the journalists need to be transparent"¹⁷.

Before the WW I, the journalism schools had included in the syllabi, professional courses which promoted ethical behaviour. The public demand for media ethics also led to a variety of codes and guidelines for media¹⁸. It is also said that journalists while reporting are not concerned about ethics until an external situation arises, that questions the ethical considerations¹⁹. Public perceptions have a bearing on media's credibility, which in turn can influence public support for freedom of press. An understanding between the media and the people decides whether the communication can continue at all. In other words, feedback of the audiences to the communicators has a greater impact on the freedom. Better understanding of people's preference by journalists would avoid public outrage over ethical issues concerning media²⁰. Different groups had different expectations from the journalists, like the communitarians wanted the press to strengthen communal values and the feminist expected a kind of journalism that portrayed women in a dignified manner²¹.

There are formal and informal controls through which media are regulated. *Formal controls* include rules and regulations, do's and don'ts and industry norms and *informal controls* comprises of civil society organizations, buyers and advertisers. Code of ethics some feel it is necessary and the others opine that it is unenforceable as it restricts the constitutional rights²². Ethical code is also seen as a contract between the public and the journalist. Through this code, the public and the journalists themselves can evaluate the journalist's performance²³. The journalists play a multi-faceted role, first as citizens and then as professionals who bring reality before the public. The principles reflect the way journalists are trained in their profession²⁴. Ethical standards helps the journalists to be responsible towards their profession²⁵. It enquires what the journalists are expected to do in the given circumstances and the kind of information they have to disseminate to the public²⁶. The journalists have a dual role task to perform, one is their commitment to liberty and equality and the other is their support to creative and energetic individual seeking just social arrangement. This dual task defines the meaning of the phrase, "a free and a responsible press"²⁷.

Media Ethics: An Indian Perspective: The citizens of India have the right to speech and expression (article 19(1) A) which they enjoy it through media. It is media who mobilizes and moulds public opinion and which is expected to do within the

framework provided, but unfortunately it is not doing so²⁸. According to *Mahatma Gandhi*, the sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges 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 within²⁹. In India, the aim of many news organizations have been to either make money or get something in return. In order to avail profit, the news has become a commodity that is bartered and traded in the flagrant and thoughtless manner and the values, ethics and sentiments associated with news have changed. The sanctity the news possessed in the past is lost now. Sensationalism and trivialization has overtaken ethics³⁰. According to Shakuntala Rao and Navajit Singh Johal, "the erosion of credibility and confidence in the media is often related to public perception that the media ship is sailing without the moral compass." According to Bajinder Pal Singh, a senior correspondent for Indian Express, "Public trust in Indian Journalism is at the lowest"³¹.

In order to look in to the working of Press, the Press Council of India was set up by the Press Council Act 1965. It was dissolved by an ordinance in 1975 and reconstituted by the Press Council Act 1978³². Section 13(2) (b) of this act entrusts the power to the Press Council to formulate a code of conduct for the press. In 1984, the press council in collaboration with the Indian Law Institute came out with a compendium of broad principles entitled "*Violation of journalistic ethics and public taste*" which is a product of the adjudication of the council. Again in the year 1992, the council brought out "*A Guide to Journalistic Ethics*" comprising principles of journalistic ethics which again were culled out of the adjudications of the council. In the year 2010, "The Norms of Journalistic conduct" were evolved by the Press Council of India (PCI) which includes journalistic standards (do's) to be followed by journalists in course of presenting information to the public³³. Ethical principles must be followed by the journalists while reporting to the public as erroneous reporting may lead to chaos, misapprehension and fuel the prevailing injustice in the society³⁴.

There are a number of cases where media's unethical practices are apparent like for instance the Radia case exposed taped telephone conversations have undermined the public standing of the journalistic profession, as senior most journalists involved were reluctant to acknowledge that they have erred³⁵. In order to improve the standards of media in India, Information and Broadcasting minister Manish Tiwari has suggested that a licence be obtained to practice journalism³⁶.

The press council of India, a statutory body to preserve the freedom of press and improve the journalistic standards of reporting wishes to include in its ambit the television and the internet. But the question is how far has it been successful in preventing unethical practices?. More than 80,000 newspapers were registered in India between 2010 and 2011 according to

the registrar of India report. Though there was an increase in the number of publications, there were relatively few cases of press regulation by the PCI in April 2011-2012. The complaints fall under two categories, complaints against the press and by the press. More than the cases that comes to it for disposal, several recent controversies involving members of print media do not come to it like election time paid news, cases of regional newspapers, hate speech and so on³⁷.

Of late we find there is a decline in media standards. Various reasons can be attributed to this, *firstly*, state of our institutes of higher education—the poor quality of education imparted by the institutions have brought down media standards. *Secondly*, lack of training given to journalists is another cause of concern, because along with a degree, skill also contributes to the personality development of media practitioners. *Thirdly*, change in media structure and ownership, commercialization of media is among the several factors which has led to decline in ethical standards because unethical practice like paid news is not questioned³⁸.

PCI chairman has made certain accusations on media; firstly media's focusing on trivial issues rather than on issues of concern³⁹, as Noam Chomsky opines that most of media reporting is biased towards the affluent and the influential class⁴⁰. Secondly dividing communities and creating misunderstanding among them and thirdly engaging itself in obscurantist fetishes like astrology and supernatural rather than propagating rational and scientific thinking⁴¹. According to *Katju* media has an important role to play in helping the country to make a transition from a feudal society to a modern industrial one quickly and without pain. He wants media to play a similar role played by the European media by attacking feudal, backward ideas and practices like casteism, communalism, superstition and promoting modern, scientific and rational ideas⁴². He advocated the 'constitution of media council' replacing the Press Council of India to regulate the activities of both print and electronic media. According to *Markandey Katju*, the proposed media council shall have 48 members, as against 28 members in the Press Council of India. Of 48 members, 40 shall be the representatives of media (20 from print and 20 from broadcast media) and the council should be given the power of punishing media if it violates the code of conduct and repeated violation would lead to cancellation of licence⁴³. The parliamentary Standing committee too raised this issue in wake of the poor disposal status of the paid news by the Press Council of India⁴⁴.

Conclusion

The media owes social responsibility. It has a multifarious role to play. According to the Press Council of India chairman *Markandey Katju*, "A large section of the population are ignorant and backward, it is all the more necessary that modern ideas are brought to them and their backwardness removed so that they become part of the enlightened India"⁴⁵. Only with the

help of media that a number of issues like terrorism, improving international relations, eradicating poverty, solving the problem of unemployment, creating awareness among the people on the issues of concern and others, a solution to all these problems could be found as media could do wonders. "Free and a responsible press" if this phrase is to be true in spirit and form, media is expected to follow the ethical standards while reporting and at the same time media also be provided with the requisites for maintaining ethical standards. As far as the PCI is concerned it enjoys limited powers and therefore it must at the most be given the power to keep the media on toes by empowering it to punish those found guilty of violating the norms of journalistic conduct.

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