

# ABERRATIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES IN INDIAN NEWS MEDIA ETHICS

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**Abstract:** *This article discusses the definition of media ethics with a particular reference to Indian news media. In India media ethics is a conventional mass media-related convention. But standard ethical standards face constant challenges with the advancement of technology and the advent of the Internet. This article addresses three incidents in which the conventional mass media - Press or TV - have deviated from the existing ethical values and journalistic standards that Indian news media usually practice. This paper examines these aberrations and analyzes the ethical values of news media distorted for a more universal reason. In Indian news media, the article concluded the future of media ethics.*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves recommendations on right and wrong conduct. Media ethics has been a topic for almost a century to explore. With its broad moral position and commitment to ethical codes, the power, effect and life of the media are essential questions. Ralph. E Hanson<sup>1</sup>(2015) said that media ethics is a complicated topic, since it deals with an organization that does not do things ordinarily. Media ethics deals with basic moral and ethical values and principles in all media forms, including print, broadcasting, film, theater, publicity and the Internet.

Journalism's ethics is one of the well-defined and often most debated branches of media ethics. The Society of Professional Journalists 'code of ethics<sup>2</sup> has four main tenants: a) Seek truth and report it, b) Minimize harm, c) Act independently and d) Be accountable and transparent. A range of issues, such as the handling of content (by governments, companies, journalists themselves or their organizations), differences between the public interest and the privacy of individuals or of confidentiality (for the protection of the rights of individuals or for the protection of national interests).

Although the freedom of the media is enshrined in the Constitution of democracy countries such as India and has a clear legal definition and application, there are several clauses in the exercise of this freedom by individual journalists, such as the perspective of the media owner, the resources available for the reporting of any event or event, and the perspective of the readers or the public Efficient communication networks in the form of mass media in democratic democracies are essential to ensuring transparency and transparent governance for elected officials. Mass media today are unavoidable in the measure that the political responsibilities are greatest if freedom of the media disappears. The question, however, is whether constitutional freedom can, in the face of other barriers facing journalists, be practiced to its full extent. Ethics and morals take on importance in this respect. Plaisance (2009)<sup>3</sup>, "Idealism – how strong we feel about

pursuing human rights goals and relativism - is the conviction that the only way we will be able to determine what is right and what is not to depend on our own experiences and our own personal moral compass." The main concepts of ethics in these circumstances are explained. 3 But the expectations that journalists are impartial, committed to the facts, resist sensationalism and act without external pressures are rooted in these values.

The aim of this paper is to understand, particularly in the recent past, the impact of ethics on Indian news media. In view of the opportunities of the digital media, we know that conventional mass media like press and television face a major challenge. The advent of the New Communications Technology (NCT) was announced in Garrison 4(1996) which brought a range of traditional media opportunities and challenges. The interactive and more social way, the close proximity of the transmitter to the receiver virtually, instant feedback, extreme versatility and simplicity of the medium and great usability bring great advantages for the digital media over conventional media. If we look back on the capacity of the two media to spread the news, we can see their variations in scope, usability, versatility and interface. While adversaries may claim that the Internet is restricted to the majority of India's citizens through fast developing ICT and mobile connectivity, the Internet connection is quickly made accessible to many users.

The conventional news media such as the newspapers, radio, and television in front of this flexible and social adversary employs creative news disseminating strategies that raise topics that had previously been deemed in bad taste to news media and were therefore untouched, depending upon sensational or even scandalous news items. A more assiduous and over-active news media and TV have certain benefits. This means that the news media are now given further problems, problems which have been left unresolved for all these years. It also means that maybe with the expansion of the region, more individuals, parts and groups which were not represented before would be reflected in the press and news channels' news articles or reports. But moral and ethical responsibilities could be heavily weighed by the pressure of competition. In view of the emerging market powers, the analysis will address the ethical principles of news journalism in the Indian traditional mass media.

## **THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA**

The role of the Indian press in the freedom struggle of the nation is remarkable. The press was both directly and indirectly a strong weapons of freedom fighters. The leaders of the nationalist movements expressed their views and inspired the people and organized support of the different movements through their writings in the press. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru, the great leaders of our independence movement, relied on newspapers to spread their opinion and sentiment. Beside her progressive efforts to meet the people, the extremist fighting for Indian independence often depended on the press. So the influence of these written words was also relied on by Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Aurabindo Ghosh and their love. The news, the only mass media of the period that was independent from the British control, was not only an instrument in the fight for Indian freedom but also associated with the movement for independence.

The press' focus on post-independence was changed by the sea. No competitor was seen (in the Congress party) and, in the earliest decades, the official line was trailed, the government sources quoted (which at that time were the only authentic news sources, and thus gave the highest priority), and the problems and outlook that toppled the official version were highlighted. The press became the government's extension. At the time, the other common mass media, TV, were worse. The only accessible Doordarshan network was an organization owned by the government and the ruling party decided on the contents and programs of the organization. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's 1977 national emergency struck the press quite out of its longer wintertime. It was awoken by the strangulation of freedom of speech and a general crush of independent contact and transmission. Most press sections were vehemently and ardently protesting. In the 80ies, newspapers began looking for alternate viewpoints and news outlets, concentrating on many other topics than those in official circulation, such as those concerned with developments, empowerment and investigative journalism. The government is increasingly opposed to government policies and initiatives. At the beginning of the 1990s, news and discoveries about matters that were contentious and even covert but which had significant social implications became whistleblowers in society. The question of ethics in news journalism has been spoken about and examined over and over again as surprising, at times scandalous and sometimes contentious methods for encapsulating news.

### **THE AVAILABILITY OF INTERNET AND ONLINE NEWS**

In the 1990s, the status of the national television channel had not changed as it was still under the government's control, but satellite TV emerged under private ownership, revolutionizing the content of the television and the aspirations of viewers. Talking and live telephone calls during broadcast increased the audience's interest and contributed to the increasing viewership by means of audio-visual impact of the medium along with penetrating information, closeness to issues transmitted through direct television and opportunities for instant interaction. The press has launched online versions of their printed version not to be missed in this race. Now, the 24x7 news, the interactive and all-inclusive internet and two conventional and most appropriate mass media, the press and television, have outstripped themselves to make their readers and audiences visible, accessible and modern.

The two mass media were now beginning to use the Internet as a news source and quote new sources for references and views. They "googled" all the facts and looked for information on their news articles through other search engines. The Internet was a source of news for other mainstream media at the initial level. It was gradually becoming a useful news outlet for the masses, reducing the importance of conventional news media, including the press and TV. The following two points can be discussed in order to address the utility of the Internet in the context of knowledge acquisition. The first is the value of the Internet as a cheap information source. Through comparing the Internet with other information sources, the perceived low cost of using the Internet for data-searching is determined. In this regard, the Internet is an important element in its dominance over other networks. Secondly, the Internet is a helpful way to get knowledge from conventional sources which cannot be accessed. The Internet's advancements have transcended conventional media's limits. Several studies show that the Internet offers users the chance to exchange a range of information<sup>5</sup> and <sup>6</sup>. (Chen & Xie, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). In the internet looking for dissemination and collection, the conventional media and

consumers have both understood the advantages of the internet. The online newspapers gave the conventional media the chance, with their versatility and easy access, to confront some of the problems faced by the broadcast media and to broaden the range of live television news channels. The progress of the internet, which provided users with direct accessibility to news and information and sometimes liberated users from their dependency, also disadvantaged all traditional mass media. The conventional news media looked for ways and means to ensure exposure to the reader. They changed their attitude to news and at times forgot ethical and moral principles. They became also more desperate. A analysis of various news articles, the news items, language and methods, and even the news collection technology, caused serious dismay for journalistic ethics. It was not only a problem in India, but a common occurrence all over the world. The uninhibited digital media posed a significant threat to the ethics of the prevalent mass media. It seemed archaic and hard to adhere to the principles of fact, objectiveness, responsibilities and openness.

### **INSTANCES OF VIOLATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES BY THE INDIAN MEDIA**

We know that the distinctive features of news writing are accuracy, precision, impartiality, objectivity and public accountability. However, these "journalist canons" have recently been severely threatened. In acquiring newsworthy information and then spreading it to the public, the press organizations and reporters and broadcasters lack and at time ignore the "code of ethics." This may be attributed to various reasons such as arousal of sensationalities, the readership and publicity, proprietors' pressure, intimidation from powerful and useful news outlets and selective spreading and retention of news items by journalists for one or more of the reasons mentioned above.

Let's think of the first instance. Most journalistic code of ethics comprises the principle of "limitation of harm". This means retaining such specifics from news coverage such as the names of small children, victims of crime or information not related to specific news reports that may damage the credibility or lives of others or hinder the administration's work. An example is the case of Aarushi murder which triggers a media hysteria. In 2008, in the posh Delhi district, a young girl named Aarushi Talwar and the housekeeper were killed. The case of double assassination was intensively scrutinized by the media with its way and grammar that led to a media-limit debate. Without sufficient corroboration by the authorities involved, the media pronounced guilt and innocence. The pressures of the media constantly pressured the Investigatory Office (CBI) to assist the Supreme Court, which passed an order for restrictions to prevent the media from reporting on the case scandalously or sensationally. "We call on the media not to make anything seem dramatic that affects reputations," said Justice Altamas Kabir. But it cannot arbitrarily blame broadcast media and press. In the internet, the newspapers used the "reconstruction" technique of the crime scene and incident and the TV stations and newspapers were also used to accentuate the interest of the audience/readers in the subject. The desire to sensationalize the news arose from the importance and vitality of the public domain. The ethical principles and legal standards clearly differentiate between "public interest" and "public interest." While the first concerns the problems that affect the public's benefit, the second concerns issues that might be of concern to the public. News reports in the



second category should be carefully selected and carefully presented so that they do not affect the privacy and credibility of subjects. The mass media must be readily available and highly transparent and clearly distinguish between what the public must know and how much.

The problems of "public interest" can often become a serious threat to the security of people and nations. In the following example it is clearer that the Indian media are deviated from existing ethical norms. I'm referring to media, particularly TV coverage during the terrorist attacks of 26/11 in 2008 in Mumbai. The coverage of television stations attacking India on 26/11 has been severely criticized for blinding attention to the safety of the hostages, rescue operators and particularly the national interest. Although all other attack points were released by 28 in the morning from terrorists, the Taj Hotel was still under terrorists influence. The coverage from the TV provided terrorists with a live coverage from the rescuers' point of view to potential tactics and steps to be implemented by NSG in Operation Black Tornado without any problems about its effect on security issues and delaying the rescue process. The sensationality of a rescue mission in live coverage helped a thrilling viewership, which may have led the media to schedule their TV channels in such a way. The newspaper coverage of the 26/11 terrorist assaults has been found to be more balanced and ethical than the electronic media, according to Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)<sup>8</sup>. However, it is attributable to the existence of the print media which, as the television networks had to rush to reporting and still focused on "being the first to race," has been able to check and present relevant facts and stories. Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)<sup>9</sup> said that there was considerable opposition to the sensationalization of the attacks by electronic media and a need to monitor media contents in cases of emergencies. The Indian Government has chosen to comply with media freedom and refrained from regulating the legislation, but in the event of an emergency, the Indian News Broadcaster Association (NBA) has established a code. The example clearly demonstrates the lack of ethical standards in the media. The TV channels can argue the live streams on social netting websites and on the internet, but the TV is no doubt more popular and images on the TV cameras have been posted to social networking sites. In terms of success and publicity sponsorship, the economic viability of the transport disregarded ethical values. A quantitative analysis of advertising sales for national channels on live television will be an insightful research.

The press and television have repeatedly been allegedly "sting" against the media. Although sting operations provide astonishing disclosures which benefit society due to their exposition of the facts, critics question the ethical truthfulness of journalistic use of sting tactics. The media may use the sting operation to reveal facts, spouse causes or carry out a social agenda. It does also convey falsehood and prejudice and does not give the victim the scope to defend itself under the circumstances. This type of action can disclose the facts, but leaves a lot to be desired in the face of ethical property issues. The one-sided affair is a stain on the code of journalism and justice.

Let us take the example of "Operation West End" popularly known as "Tehelka" revelations in 2001. The weekly "tehelka," meaning sensation, published video pictures of high-ranking officials and politicians. The images taken by a sting operation revealed the highest order of corruption. However, considering its optimistic aims, the public was involved in the proceedings of the case after the initial shockwaves. The approaches used by the reporters of Tehelka (females, liquors and the bribery and breach of their rights have received little

public support. The disclosures caused considerable turmoil over the exposure-related ethical problems. The journalists of Tehelka participated in false impersonations, bribed the victims under a false pretext, and were also guilty of other ethical breaches. Few people have been exposed to the use of sting operations in culture to uncover wrongdoing against conventional investigatory reporting methods. Even after the Tehelka operation, the desired result could not have been achieved by a number of other sting operations involving Bollywood figures, politicians and government officials in small time. Traditional investigative journalism cannot be replaced with sting surgeries, in which there can be severe consequences but the basis is detrimental. "At times an operation with the sting can serve the reason for this, according to Sadhu10. But the investigative journalism is not an option. The media in India need to resort to investigative reporting to establish their reputation and guarantee their independence under democracy." Various obstacles exist, for example, the pressure to create the feelings to appeal to people; the predetermined agenda of owners and editors, or the pressure to be the first to give the users the 'break-news' in the face of heavy rivalry between many news channels and several centuries of newspapers. The operation Tehelka sting and others which followed were broadcast on national TV stations again and again in the following days, before public attention was lost.

## CONCLUSION

Journalists must work independently not only to uphold professional principles but to protect their independence and civil rights enthusiastically. In bringing information and understanding to the public, journalists everywhere play an essential role. Things such as fairness, transparency and accuracy should therefore remain sensitive. Reporters must always ask their ethical questions and be able to explain their actions to editors, colleagues and the public at all points of their investigations. Usually, the ethical approach is harder, but if they want to uphold the sainthood of their media, any reporter will be willing to face such a challenge. In the distribution of news items the Indian media has always maintained a moral standard. The few examples I cited in the previous paragraphs must therefore be aberrations from the usual.

But it is also a reality that there is a greater threat to the conventional news media because of the presence of strong online media. Along with the advancements in Communication and ICT, the advantages of digital media discussed here offer a path that conventional media cannot expect to compete with. The new media are also advantageous. Traditional news media are forced to use the Internet to collect and assemble information to expand the medium for acquiring information. However, the mass media must be vigilant when choosing the sources of information or circulating some particular item. The existence of an omniscient media can make it easier for end users, but it is difficult for traditional mainstream media to counteract digital media advantages and make them reader viable. It is also a challenge for mass media to comply in the course of spreading and gathering news with traditional journalistic and ethical practices. The news on the internet would be more uninhibited and generalized, as new and known outlets would be available. Continued entry of new senders and recipients will also mean the lack of regulations and unrestricted exchange of information. For traditional media, the journalistic code of ethics which calls for factual accuracy and minimizes harm to sources and subjects, is determined to act freely, independently of the circumstances and determination to remain open. The

high quality of Indian journalism in the past and the acceptability and availability of mass media will guarantee that the Indian news media have ethical values.

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