

RELEVANCE OF ETHICS IN THE FIELD OF MEDIA

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Abstract: Ethics is the rules of conduct or principles of morality that point us towards the right or best way to act in a situation. The purpose of this article is to improve the effectiveness of ethical thoughts and decision making among the media professionals. There are two main classical ethical theories which are frequently employed to determine correct media behaviour: Kantian theory (deontology) and Consequential (teleology) theory. Apart from these two ethical theories, virtue ethics is very relevant in this context. Virtue ethics is person rather than action based. These principles provide a framework for analysing what is proper for examining choices and for justifying media actions. If journalists sincerely want to make moral decision, which ethical principle will they follow? This article also shows that, sometimes media violate ethical principles. So, it concludes with a discussion of, there should be a controlling body which can govern and regulate all the kinds of media in the world. Ethics is based on morality and humanity. Without good intention, merely following the ethical rules is not enough. Media ethics governs and guides this important segment of communication. A solid foundation for ethical thinking in media is needed now more than ever.

Key-words: Media ethics, Media impact, Code of media behaviour, Kantian theory, Consequentialist approach, Violation of ethical conduct.

Ethical basis is required in every sphere of our personal, social or political life, without it everything will be chaotic and dangerous. In this modern globalized era of communication, media—either print or electronic, has a distinctive role to play and has a tremendous impact on its readers and viewers of the society, we live in. This powerful mode of communication will not function properly and smoothly, without following a certain set of governing rules or code of conduct. A solid foundation for ethical thinking in media is needed now more than ever. In today's modern age media plays a very important role in our daily and social lives. Practically it has become a household name. Thus one thing is clear, that whatever information we get, is conveyed to us by the media. Hence, it is very important that, media has to be ethical. Media should be guided by some ethical norms. It is quite clear that certain sets of morally acceptable rules must be there which can regulate each and everybody – print as well as electronic media of the country.

'Media' and 'ethics' are two different terms. So, at first, we have to understand the meaning of these terms. Let us first consider, what is media? – The plural of the word 'medium' is 'media'. Medium is the means by which a message reaches an audience. For example, our television set is a kind of medium.

Right from the age of discovery of fire human civilization has witnessed many changes. Mankind has achieved the highest degree of supremacy. Now we are living in the era of globalization, or in other words, we are in the digital age. To understand this digital age, it is important to understand the process of communication. Communication is the act of sending ideas and opinion from one person to another. There are three modes in which people can communicate are intrapersonal, interpersonal and mass communication. Each communication situation involves a number of people in a specific way. However the most important kind of communication among people is mass communication. It is a kind of communication from one person or from a group of person through a transmitting device (a medium) to a large audience.

There are two types of media – print media and electronic media. This is the basic classification. Both print media and electronic media have several divisions and various representations. Print media may be of following kinds – books, newspapers, magazines, journals, periodicals, leaflets, pamphlets, article etc. On the other hand, radio, recordings, television, cinema, Internet is cases of electronic media.

Now, the next question is – what is ethics? The word ‘ethics’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’, which means ‘custom’ or ‘character’. Ethics can be defined as the science of human conduct, or character. It is a normative science, a study of good and bad, right and wrong and refers to virtuous and vicious actions of individuals and institutions. It deals with certain principles and standards by which we judge individual and institutional actions to be right or wrong, moral or immoral. Ethics not only describes principles and standards by which we judge, but also concerns itself with justification of those principles and standards. Ethics is not simply a collection of do’s and don’ts, but a system of principles and values intended to make human social living, civilized and happy. Ethics therefore, is concerned not only with what we should do, or how to judge human practices as right and wrong; but is also concerned with what we should do to change certain morally objectionable social practices towards creating a better society or a better world.

The word ‘ethics’ is not a modern term. For centuries, it has been used by the people, especially by the philosophers. It is said that some 2500 years ago, Greek philosophers had divided their work into three broad segments – aesthetic or the study of beauty, epistemology or the study of knowledge and ethics or the study of conduct. Ethics is important because it allows us to function in a humane and socially equitable manner; it also helps us to act responsibly. Ethics matters because it allows us to implement our divergent values in a non-coercive environment.

Ethics is not merely a theoretical study, but an application of moral arguments to justify

human choices and actions, as right and wrong, or good and bad. The study of ethics should not be separated from the sphere of social life. Applied ethics is therefore, central to the whole of philosophical thought, for it highlights the practical consequences of the views about the nature of life and of human thoughts. As Peter Singer aptly said, “if ethics is not practical, it is not really ethical; if it is no good in practice, it is no good in theory either”.¹

Now, the central question is, why do we need ethics in the field of media? Or, why media ethics is important?

In the present world media is undoubtedly an important medium in our daily lives, while in the ancient times it was not so, and most people lived without it. The purpose of the media is to make us aware of the outside world. In the modern civilization it is a necessity; even the people of the remote areas feel the necessity of media. However, the media does not always play a satisfactory role in people’s lives – since media is not free from bias. This is where, the question of ethics comes in. It is felt that there should be ethical guidelines for media.

Depending on the genetic code and environment, different people are of different character, integrity and behaviour. Modern civilization is a collective presentation and contribution of all these diverse personalities. This is of course essential for growth in different direction. Mere growth is not enough. It should be healthy, perfect and have to be acceptable by all. Malignant growth is growth too but it is not desirable. Herein lays the importance of ethics. As blood reaches in all the cells of our body for nourishment, growth and development, media like blood reaches to all the segments of the society and has tremendous impact over them. Ethics acts as a controller; it questions the place of any untoward incident that is likely to produce ill effects in the media.

‘Pituitary’ is the master gland of the human body. ‘Ethics’ can be compared with the pituitary gland in the human body. Just as organs are controlled by hormones, similarly organizations are controlled by ethics. Medical profession is controlled by medical ethics, marketing division is controlled by business ethics, and likewise – media is controlled by media ethics.

Media ethics is a branch of applied ethics. Applied ethics is the application of the moral principles to the different aspects of our life. Media ethics is a kind of professional ethics. Now the question is, why should a professional be ethical and moral in his conduct and role? First of all, a professional is a human being and morality is a natural human faculty. Confucius, once asked to state in one sentence, what the true moral rule is, replied in one word- “Reciprocity”.²

Ethics of journalism includes principles of ethics, which are most widely known to the journalists as their professional ‘code of ethics’ or the ‘cannon of journalism’. Some of the most important principles are honesty, truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public

accountability. Like many broader ethical systems, journalism ethics includes the principle of 'limitation of harm'. This often involves the withholding of certain details from reports, such as the names of the minor children, crime victim's names or information not materially related to particular news reports release of which might, harm someone's reputation. Apart from these, transparency is the important pillar of media. Media should be honest and accurate in all communications. According to Onora O'Neill, "Openness and transparency are now possible on a scale of which past ages could barely dream."³

These codes and canons evolved via observation of and response to past ethical lapses by the journalists and publishers. Journalist's code of ethics is designed as a guide through which they solve their numerous difficulties or ethical dilemmas. The codes and canons provide the journalists a framework for self-monitoring and self-correction as they pursue professional assignments.

Journalism is a social practice. Various media of mass communication – print and electronic media – reach out to large number of people. Some, among them are highly educated while others are illiterate, some are rich while others are poor – in other words, this means that there are different kinds of people, but all of them are influenced by the media. As people need food, shelter and health care for their physical survival, they need communication for their social welfare. So, our next task would be to determine what can be included within the boundaries of ethical and responsible media coverage –

Events that have social – public meaning, for example, an assassination of a Prime minister; the tragic death of a well known person, an earthquake, a train accident, missile attack, terrorist attack, a scientific discovery, a technological breakthrough, the opening of a newspaper, parliamentary election, corruption in a local city council, a massacre on a bus, the death of famous movie stars or a celebrity etc.

Apart from the reasons discussed so far, there is another very important reason, why ethics is needed in the field of media. Because media also deals with certain sensitive issues like – sexual crime violence, social and religious conflicts, communal tensions and riots, drug abuse, terrorism, political conflicts, social crisis, war and so on. That is why media is very important and media must be controlled by ethics or some ethical rules. The main function of the media is – sourcing, reporting and disseminating information, which is aimed for the public. It is the people who provide the news and it is people to whom the news is reported. Journalists have to use the appropriate, proper and relevant language, while reporting news, explaining facts or analyzing information- "The choice of language should be carefully considered. Words can have more than

one meaning, and meanings can change in different contexts.”⁴

There are two main classical ethical theories which are frequently employed to determine correct media behaviour: Kantian theory (deontology) and Consequential (teleology) theory.

Kantian theory: Kant’s theory of ethics is considered deontology for several reasons. Deontology focuses on a person’s duty (‘Deon’ means ‘duty’ in Greek) as a means to determine appropriate action. According to Kant it was the intentions behind an action that rendered it ethical or unethical. He argued that the only right intention was the intention to act out of duty. This duty is that which can be said to be good in all situations. He believed that there was only one virtue which was good without qualification; that is goodwill. Actions motivated by goodwill are done out of respect for moral law and out of duty. For Kant the consequences of an action cannot be used to determine that the person has goodwill. Good consequence can arise by accident from an action that is motivated by a desire to cause harm to an innocent person, and bad consequence can arise from an action that is well motivated. So, he claims that a person has goodwill when he acts out of respect for the moral law.

An action is considered to be morally good if it is done solely out of duty. According to Kant, “A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination- still less because it is done from self-interest, - but because it is done from the sake of duty”.⁵ An action – even if it is considered a duty and is, in that sense, right, is not regarded as morally good if it is done from self interest or from a direct impulse of sympathy or generosity. Here an important point is, an action done from natural sympathy may be right and praiseworthy, but it has no moral worth. However, the same action done solely out of duty, has distinctively moral worth. For example, helping others is obviously good and praiseworthy, but this action will be morally good if it is done out of a sense of duty and not out of sympathy. So, motive of an action is very important. Here another example, certainly it is the duty of a grocer that he should not overcharge his inexperienced customer; and where there is much competition an intelligent shopkeeper should refrain from so doing and keep to a fixed and general price for everybody, so that even a child can buy from him just as well as anyone else. Thus he can serve people honestly but he does not do so out of duty; his self interest requires him to do so. So, the action is done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination, but solely out of self interest.

The categorical imperative, for Kant, is the fundamental principle of ethics, which determines the morality or immorality of actions, including media activities, in a simple and straight forward way. He held that the intentions behind an action render the action ethical or unethical.

The three formulations of this principle of categorical imperative, though distinct are interconnected. They are as follows –

- a) Act only on that maxim which you will to become a universal law.
- b) Always treat people as an end in themselves and not just a means.
- c) Act as if you were a lawmaker in the kingdom of ends.

All these three formulations of the categorical imperative, collectively and distributedly, have important bearing on media actions and hence on media ethics. The most obvious impact issues from the first formulation. A person's actions, including media actions, must be based on that maxim, which they can will as a universal law. On the contrary, if the act on a maxim which cannot be willed universally, their action will be immoral.

Kant's categorical imperative is a very important concept for the media: media should act out of duty, not from immediate inclination or self interest. It is primary duty to provide accurate and impartial information or news.

Consequential Theory : Kantian model of media ethics is mainly concerned with the rightness or wrongness of media actions themselves but the teleological or consequential theory is primarily concerned with the purpose and consequences of such actions. According to this theory, actions themselves do not have any inherent value, but can be appraised in hindsight by virtue of their consequences. Therefore all actions should be thoroughly considered in terms of their possible outcomes before being executed. The outcome of an action can be evaluated from two perspectives – ethical egoism and ethical altruism. Ethical egoism holds that actions whose consequences will benefit the agent of the action can be considered ethical. This view does not present any cohesive social model. On the contrary, ethically good actions are those that benefit others.

One of the most popular consequentialist theories is – utilitarianism. This utilitarianism approach is applicable to the media as it considers the well-being of society at large. This theory holds the principle of greatest good for the greatest number. Mill, who developed the ideas of Bentham, argued that, an action should have positive consequences for as many people as possible. Mahatma Gandhi's concept of 'sarvodaya' the welfare of all resembles the utilitarian theory. But he believed that, his 'sarvodaya' was different from utilitarianism – 'sarvodaya' advocates greatest good of all.

The consequentialist theories focus only on the outcome/ end of an action. So, one should invest enough time in considering all the possible outcomes of a certain action to determine whether the overall good is greater than the negative consequences. This theory is constantly applied in

decision making by the journalists.

Apart from these two ethical theories, I think, virtue ethics is very relevant in this context. Virtue ethics emphasizes the role of one's character and the virtues that one's character embodies for determining or evaluating ethical behaviour. Virtue ethics is person rather than action based.

Virtue ethics not only deals with the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, it provides guidance – how to achieve good character and behaviour? Hence, virtue ethics is concerned with the whole of a person's life, rather than particular episodes or actions. So, if we follow the path of virtue ethics each and every member (including-reporter, editor, reader, and viewer) of the society will be virtuous, and as a result we can build a good society.

Sometimes media violate ethical principles. The mass media have come under fire in recent years for failing to practice high moral and ethical standards. The major areas of criticism focus on the news media, the blurring of content and advertisements and media entertainment.

In the modern era of civilization – moral values and ethical perspective took a back seat and economic factor, power and monetary gain seem to be the sole driving factor for our advancement of the society, in-general. Media is of no exception. Be in print or electronic media, deviation from ethical values and moral character seen everywhere.

There is an obvious connection between the occurrences of violence in society and the depiction of it in the media. But what is the nature of this connection? What causality is involved? Do the media merely mirror the real violence in society? Or do they cause it or contribute to it?

Portrayals of violence in the mass media and their possible negative effects have become the subject of worldwide intensive public discussion.

Few years back, a well-known industrialist of India took utmost interest for setting up of a commercial motor vehicle unit near Kolkata, with the help of the local state government. Opposition party of that time made tremendous hue and cry on the pretext of conserving agricultural land on which the project will come up. Media took the matter immediately for their own economic benefit of circulation. Opponent political party very tactfully used the media for their own political advantage. Road block and agitation goes on for several months. Media circulates and aired the mass violence continuously. At last, surprisingly enough violence took the toll- stopping the project permanently and opposition political party regained their power by out rooted the then ruling party. This episode clearly shows that, political parties sometime stimulate the mass violence by using the media for their own political interest. Media too fail to judge the situation ethically and morally.

Prior to poll, political parties rejuvenate themselves with much pomp and vigour and jump into the fray for all round campaign. No political party seem to lag behind. They utilize their full

resources for their own win and to ruin the opposition. At this critical juncture, media too, shake off their skin and jumped into action- burring all ethical norms and values to highlight the political issues which normally they should not take care of. Here they act as political spokesman. Ethical values are of no use then. Moral codes of conduct usually seem to violate indiscriminately not only by the political parties but also by the media too, which they should not.

Now-a-days particularly in India, negative reporting gained much momentum and priority than positive one. Affection, inherent human values, relationships, love, honesty, purity and all such intricate delicacies of human life are being buried by the media for their own better circulation and benefit without upholding the eternal ethical values of our human life and society.

Throughout the world, there are several newspapers, journals, TV channels, periodicals etc. Their languages, intentions and purpose are different. Now-a-days, the world we live in – is like a single home, whose several members live together. Members of the family may have different modes of activities, different occupation etc. But for development, peace and tranquillity of the home, all members should follow a common rule, which is accepted by all. Media ethics is, like that set of rules which must be followed and adhered to by all possible kinds of media. Question arises, as to who will pronounce the required punishment of the rule breakers? P.T.I, Reuter, UNI, or any such body? If they themselves break the rule – then what will happen? What sort of power and authority do they have to govern the media? At present there are governing bodies but they have no authoritative power. Regarding health matters, every country must follow the guidelines of the WHO (World Health Organization). But regarding ‘media ethics’ no such body is present. Considering the power, impact and ability of the media, there should exist a controlling body which can govern and regulate all the kinds of media in the world.

Now we need to understand that ethical rules are not like Indian Penal Code or criminal laws of any country. It is based on morality and humanity. Without good intention, merely following the ethical rules is not enough. In the era of communication, media – print as well as electronic- has tremendous impact on the civilians and the society. Media ethics governs and guides this important segment of communication.

Currently volumes of ethical values, rules, norms and their implication for the society are available as ready reckoners. Merely books, lectures in the university class rooms and seminars are not enough to reach the goal, we desire. It must be applicable and workable. Without following and adherence to the norms by all of us, including the media, the true essence of ethics will never be achieved. All media personnel must take oath with good intention, to follow the moral/ethical norms, and then only its effect can be seen.

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