
UNIT 4 MEDIA ETHICS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit highlights the nature, role and important aspects Media Ethics. Before that one should know the nature and the role of Media Ethics. Hence this chapter with varied sections on Media Ethics aims to bring out this aspect.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The opinions, attitude, and conduct of persons depend upon the information available to them and upon the images and feeling tones impressed upon them. Most of our knowledge of contemporary events comes to us from the newspaper, the radio, television and movies. Our emotions and attitudes also are formed to large extent by the media. Those who control our means of mass communication not only report current events and history of the world help to make history. We cannot think correctly and clearly about either domestic or world affairs unless we obtain accurate information. If the sources and the channels of information are tainted or distorted, all people are in a serious danger of being led astray. The democratic way of life depends upon the existence of free agencies of mass media, as the public is kept informed and alert.

Media ethics is concerned about the question of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable about the means and ways that the media collects and presents information and news. It is also about the normative and prescriptive nature of guiding and controlling the practical aspect of media with ethical principles. Relevance of these principles are always discussed, at times contested also by journalists and audiences depending on the specific situations and context. The impact that media has on the audience is always comes under the purview of media ethics. (Melisande 2009)

4.2 CODE OF ETHICS FOR MEDIA

The importance and inevitability of media is expressed in the following saying, “If journalism at one time seemed to be an appendix to culture, today, by contrast, culture finds itself at the mercy of journalism. It is part of a world dominated by journalism. The mass media decide who will be known and to what degree and according to which interpretation.” (Milan Kundera 1984) Media

is that influential that it is not exaggeration to say that journalists make daily decisions for people. There is always a tension between the public's right to know the truth and an individual's claim to privacy. Those decisions are grounded in ethical decision-making tools that may include a formal Code of Ethics. Media ethics tries to prevent any monopoly over information diffusion; upholds pluralism instead of the uniform gloss over media content that is typically brought on by authoritarian regimes; maintains objectivity by providing different sides of an issue, which empowers audiences to formulate their own judgments and increases levels of truthfulness in reporting. (Melisande 2009)

The following codes are formulated to regularise the media in general.

Responsibility: The right of a newspaper to attract and hold readers is restricted by nothing but considerations of public welfare. A journalist who uses his power for any selfish or otherwise unworthy motive is not trustworthy. We shall elaborate on this elsewhere. **Freedom of the Press:** Freedom of the press is guarded as a vital right of media. It is the unquestionable right to discuss whatever is not explicitly forbidden by law including the wisdom of any restrictive statute. **Independence:** Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital. **Sincerity, Truthfulness, Accuracy:** These enable media have a good rapport with the reader. **Impartiality:** news reports and expression of opinion are expected to be free from bias of any kind. **Fairplay:** question of private rights and public interest distinguished from public curiosity, is discussed in fairplay of the media. We would further the discussion on it in the later section. Secondly, it is the privilege as well as the duty, of media to make prompt and complete correction of its own serious mistakes of fact.

4.3 BEING ETHICAL IN PRINT MEDIA

The daily print media is the basic means for the day-by-day dissemination of the news. It is the gate way of elaborate information of the world and its events. It has greater influence on the society. It furnishes news or information regarding the events of the contemporary world, with an interpretation and comments upon these events. Newspapers can 'head-line' some items of news or opinions and make them seem very important, and they can suppress items or omit them entirely. They advertise for business and other establishments, acting as a sales medium. They furnish entertainment of various types, from comic strips to puzzles. They provide miscellaneous information which it is difficult to classify under any of the above headings. The ethical training of the correspondents, reporters and the editors tells upon the type of presentation in a particular media. The vision, viewpoint and ideology - be it social, economic and political - of a specific media guides their way of presentation. They are the inarticulate major premises that necessarily colour the reports they make. Much news is gathered and dispatched by great news-gathering agencies, or press associations.

Print media is under severe criticism from time to time. Three major criticisms are usually levelled against the newspaper today. They are as follows: It is said that the press, while claiming to be an objective agent for the dissemination of news, is in reality a group of business corporations run in the interest of profits for the owners or the stockholders. Due to this business link with mere profit motive, print media is subject to financial pressure and is controlled by a small group. Eventually it tries to serve their social, political and economic interests. It is claimed that newspapers are subject to additional pressure from major advertisers. In order to please the advertiser owing to huge revenue from them, most of the times, print media may

indulge in distortion and improper slanting of the news. Most newspapers are frankly partisan in politics. When economic issues are involved, newspapers with few exceptions serve the interests of the dominant groups.

Media ethics demands social responsibility with public interest. In the words of Owens-Ibie serving the public interest would mean “the mass media are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in the government, which, in a way, keeps rulers in check. Also, the media should be reporting on and promoting discussion of ideas, opinions and truths toward the end of social refinement; acting as a nation’s ‘bulletin board’ for information and mirroring the society and its peoples just the way they are, thus exposing the heroes and the villains.” (Owens-Ibie, 1994)

In order to regularise the print media towards serving the larger interest of people rather than few influential and powerful groups, certain ethical guidelines are emphasized. Legislative action is suggested to check the monopoly in the handling the information. As individuals, we should widen our range or variety of reading and check items or articles that arouse our suspicion. Both public and private bureaus of information and investigation should be developed and supported. We might establish a few endowed newspapers on a non-profit basis, with different sections of the paper assigned to different interest groups.

4.4 ETHICAL NORMS FOR AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA

Broadcasting is comparatively a recent phenomenon in the modern world. The development of radio and television has been rapid and has gained tremendous power. Listening and seeing are the important aspects of society. Certain ethical issues are raised in broadcasting. The power of owning number of stations and the authority to give them licences to do so remain with the state. This limit and control of broadcasting sometimes become a coercive and manipulative by certain group of people who are favored with the privilege of using the available air waves or channels. The regulative code is that it has with the responsibility for the common good of all. News reporting also is ethically expected to be factual and objective. Programs relating to controversial public issues are needed to give fair representation to both sides of issues beyond certain bias and particular standpoint. Children’s programs are to be educative rather than mere entertaining. The pedagogical input reflects basic human values like respect for parents, law and order, clean living, high morals, fair play and ethically right behavior.

The ethical codes on audio-visual media specify things that are forbidden and be avoided such as attacks on religious sentiments, profanity, obscenity and vulgarity; material of an extreme nature which might create undesirable emotional reaction among people. The advertising of hard liquor, fortune telling, occultism must be avoided. Since much discussion has centered on the subject of crime, violence and sex in broadcasts, it is interesting to note what the codes emphasize in the fields. The radio code says that broadcasters should avoid technique and methods of crime presented in such manner as to encourage imitation or to make the commitment of crime attractive. The television code urges respect for the sanctity of marriage and shows concern that illicit sex relations are not treated as commendable.

In a section headed ‘Responsibility toward children’ the television code says: “The education of children involves giving them a sense of the world at large. Crime, violence and sex are a part of the world. They will be called up to meet and a certain amount of proper presentation of such is

helpful in orienting the child to his social responsibility". However, violence and illicit sex shall not be presented in attractive manner, not to an extent that it may make a child to believe that they play a greater part in life than they do. They should not be presented without indications of the resultant retribution and punishment. The television code points out that television makes available the finest programs of Information, Education, Culture and Entertainment. It is a valuable means of augmenting the educational and cultural influences of Schools, Institutions of higher learning devoted to education and culture. Whether we agree or not programs of excellence in these areas are commendable. On the other hand, one such study on these programmes has indicated that some parents complain of 'too much violence' and a lack of educational and religious programs. The study found that children's programme are of full violence either directly or indirectly. Some educators have warned the possible dangers to health, character and education which may result if a child spends two or more hours a day in watching Television. Others think that these dangers have been exaggerated and blame the parents, who indirectly encourage their children watching television as it keeps the children busy and "out of trouble".

Efforts to regulate radio broadcasting have been undertaken by the government. Broadcasting stations are licensed to serve the public and not for the purpose of furthering the private or group interest of individuals. Benefits derived by advertisers were to be incidental and entirely secondary. The broadcasting system was to be a kind of community mouthpiece for keeping the people informed, stimulating discussion and presenting music, drama and athletics for the entertainment of the public. The ethical standards of the radio and television industries appear to be the generally accepted standards of society. The industry tries to follow the law of the land. A certain amount of idealism is offset by the drive for profits and the desire to do the things which lead in this direction regardless of public welfare.

Concept of public interest is in the heart of media ethics and highlights the crucial role of communications sector in shaping the formation of public opinion and civil society movements. In short, field of communications is a determinant factor in framing the path of society's development. (Melisande 2009)

4.5 FREEDOM OF PRESS AND RIGHT OF PRIVACY

Many journalists believe, as witnessed particularly in India during the last couple of years, that the public's right to know and the need to expose vice and corruption are superior to all other concerns. Most of the time it turns out to be focusing more on privacy of people which is turned out to be 'newsworthy' item in their media career. People in public life are vulnerable when their private lives become a spotlight for the media. The growth in mass media size, profile and influence together with technological change or otherwise called 'information revolution,' made the privacy of people so fragile. Privacy is one of the fundamental freedoms of people and it is essential to liberty and human dignity. Media justifies such interference in privacy of people arguing that it is in the public interest. Privacy is not just a concern over personal information and the dangers of 'surveillance society.' It is more than the mere maintenance of one's 'data protection,' or confidentiality of any information.

In using the personal information of people and facts about events in an individual's life media has a greater responsibility. Even though there are strangely few odd persons who try to seek a

high profile and public recognition, to further their own interests or some cause or philosophy they support through publicly going with personal details. The balance between individual's right to privacy and public's right to know, is often unsteady. Ethical issues and choices arise out of it. The public's right to know is one of the guiding principles of journalists. They believe strongly that if officials are allowed to act in secrecy, miscarriages of justice and corruption may result. Is it an unobstructed right to know everything? Is the public's right to know always in 'the public interest'? Do journalists understand 'the public interest' to mean the public 'good', in the classic sense, or the public's curiosity? If we assume the public is always curious about the private details of other's lives (or pictures of their experiences), does that make it right to 'print everything you know'? Is the public always curious or are they often offended by the information or photographs put before them, and are the media therefore out of step with the very audience they claim to serve? These are the serious concerns in media ethics. Simple check before a journalist when deciding whether to print or broadcast a piece of information or a picture: Is it true? Is it fair? And is it necessary? (Gail Hulnick "Defining the Line Between the Public's Right to Know and the Individual's Right to Privacy")

4.6 REMEDIAL MEASURES FOR MALADIES IN MASS MEDIA

The maladies in mass media are problematic as they affect entire society directly and indirectly. For example, certain advertisements on tobacco-related materials are undoubtedly detrimental to the healthy life of people, particularly younger generation who are future pillars of the nation. The avoidance of this type of advertisement in Radio, Television and Newspaper is recommended. In smoking it is wrongly projected that freshness comes after having that smoke. When such ideology is inflicted on the minds of people, they are made to believe. Avoiding such advertisement would enable us to take care of people in any society. The mass media has an obligation to the society to show right things, right thought, right guidelines, and right behaviour.

Where ever the suppression of fact is necessary, the mass media has a duty to do it immediately. For instance reporting of sensitive communal riots and tensions might be suppressed if it would accelerate further riots and tensions in other parts of the world. Suppression of personal misbehaviour of particular individual, for which one is duly punished, is recommended with exaggerating it to be the important news item. Reporting the individual's wrong doing as belong to particular community, state, religion, or country, is unwarranted. Equality before law guarantees that wrong doer will be punished without any discrimination or preference.

Whenever an exaggeration of fact is necessary, the mass media has to do it for the welfare of people. It might alert people and enable them to protect them as early as possible. For example, news about the death of 1000 persons in road accident duet to violation of wearing helmet could possibly be exaggerated so as to create awareness among people to protect themselves. It depends upon the context that the mass media has to work carefully without any delay.

4.7 SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE MEDIA

Media ethics is given a broader concept of social responsibility. In presenting the facts and news around the globe, the Media is expected to have certain responsibility inherent within or imposed

upon, namely responsibility towards the society to which it serves. The question of social responsibility comes to be highlighted whenever there are certain controversies that are reported without foreseeing the consequences that would follow. Every one is entitled to have information. When the information is passed on media personnel have their own perspective to present. In certain cases, the presentation of certain facts may have negative impact. Hence, there comes the question of social responsibility. Defining social responsibility and regulating the aspects of it are to be carefully figured out. One may talk of theoretical grounding of the concept of social responsibility. Yet the concrete reality of practical journalism may have particular difficulties in the applications of these theoretical values. To bring about a more comprehensive understanding of social responsibility is a challenging task. Formulation of media laws are to be effective and should have a potential to result in improving the role of media. (Melisande 2009)

Accountability in the media is often defined in terms of producing records like evidence to support what has been reported. The journalist is accountable in the sense he or she is held liable for the consequences of the reporting. The liability is both in ethical and legal in nature. Responsibility for the act of reporting is on the journalist.

There is a distinction between accountability and responsibility, “Whereas accountability often is referred to as the manifestation of claims to responsibility, the latter is the acknowledged obligation for action or behavior within frameworks of roles and morals” (Plaisance, 2000). Responsibility is in this sense the obligation for proper custody, care and safekeeping of one’s audience. In social responsibility the interest of the society is given a top priority. From the Commission on the Freedom of the Press or the Hutchins Commission the following five guidelines are briefly given for A Free and Responsible Press. These principles, though valid, are lacking in precision.

- a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning;
- a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
- the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society;
- the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society;
- full access to the day’s intelligence.

Social responsibility is an obligation of the media to provide trustworthy and relevant news and information as well as opportunities for diverse voices to be heard in the public arena. It is to see that all sides are fairly presented and that the public has enough information to decide. (Siebert et al. *Social Responsibility Theory*, 1956)

4.8 ETHICS IN PRODUCING AND SCREENING OF MOVIES

Like the newspaper, the radio and television, the movies also have great power in society, especially in India. It has an impact of good or evil in the individual lives of persons, in social relationships and in the relations between nations. Numerous studies have indicated the great influence of movies, especially upon the thinking and conduct of youth. These pictures serve to set the pattern for mannerisms, styles, fashions, for ways of courtship and lovemaking and for personal adornment. They stimulate emotions and allow them to be in fantasy and in daydreaming as well as to indulge in overt behavior. They help to create ideas of right and wrong and to mould desires and ambitions. During the early development of the movie industry, there

were some scandals within the industry and considerable criticism of the type of pictures shown. This led to the emergence of censorship. The censorship legislation has a set of codes for movies with production code for distributors and producers. While a producer cannot be compelled to produce pictures in accordance with the code regulations, the code has had a beneficial effect.

In some of the larger cities the censorship boards have each year eliminated from the films brought before them several thousand scenes which they considered detrimental. Censorship as imposing certain legislative codes of conduct and screening has a clear foundation on ethical principles. It ultimately brings in improvements and high-quality films. Even though it may be argued that censorship curtails the freedom of speech, the effective use of it has shown desired results in film industry. Prohibition of obscene, lewd, and filthy scenes and forbidding the importation of any film that is immoral or obscene have done good to the society. Motion pictures are included in the list of articles that may be prohibited on the grounds of immorality or indecency from the channels of interstate commerce or circulation through the mails. The fairly widespread criticism naturally has been a matter of concern to the motion-picture industry. Besides, making some amendments in its code and adopting "an advertising code," the industry has taken steps to clean house from within and to enforce the provisions of the code. Now many theatres will not show a film unless it has been given the seal of approval of the censor board. The code of the industry states, No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented. Law, natural or human shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

4.9 MEDIA ETHICS: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Habermas' theories of communicative action and discourse ethics have indirect impact in media ethics. Ethics in the public space is discussed here. Habermas reminds us of the urgent need to protect and insulate the public discourse and its dialectics. Discourse is always collaborative or collective and bears an impact upon the receiving of a piece of communication. The author of any discourse is made responsible for its impact. Habermas' discourse ethics in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action provide a convenient framework for making this point: he borrows the universalisation principle from Kant's moral theory, extending the notion of categorical imperative to include all those affected by a norm as its participants (Hoenisch, 2000). Any communication involves both the listener and the speaker. The journalist who is communicating is intrinsically linked to his listeners. The fundamental principle of media's obligation to fulfill public interest is this relationship.

Everyone in this world is born to live comfortable life. When basic comforts are deprived people tend to forget the ethical codes and conduct in life. It would also never mean that poor are unethical. To live peacefully the basic amenities must be fulfilled. Similarly living a good life needs to be ethical by all means. Speaking of mass media one can vouch that it has done a good service so far to the people. No doubt, we have been benefited by them. It serves as a powerful tool in keeping up the democratic spirit.

Crimes against the Law: These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.

1. Murder
 - a. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
 - b. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.
 - c. Revenge in modern times shall not be justified.
2. Methods of crime should not be explicitly presented.
3. Illegal drug traffic must never be presented.

Sex: The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing. Adultery and Illicit Sex, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated or justified, or presented attractively.

Scenes of Passion: These should not be introduced except where they are definitely essential to the plot. Excessive and lustful kissing, embraces, suggestive posture and gestures are not to be shown. In general, passion should be treated in such manner as not to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.

Vulgarity: The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil subjects should be guided always by the dictates of good taste and a proper regard for the sensibilities of the audience.

Obscenity: Obscenity in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion (even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience) is forbidden.

Profanity: Pointed profanity and every other profane or vulgar expression, however used, is forbidden.

The code itself is a fairly commendable statement of objectives. Unfortunately, it has not been effectively implemented or enforced. It has been used at times, furthermore, to bar criticism of our social order, as well as to curb the indecent. Motion pictures are controlled by a huge industry which has money-making as its chief aim. With near-monopolistic control by a few companies, free competition has been definitely limited. In recent years the government has forced the separation of theatre ownership from production and distribution and has prohibited "block booking", "blind selling," and various monopolistic tactics. Film may now be individually rented. Thus exhibitors cannot legally be forced to accept or to choose. Higher standards of motion-picture entertainment may be brought about by increased public demand. In this connection, as with broadcasting, we might encourage more critical reviews and use of film Estimate Service. Today there are a number of excellent Estimate Services carried by several magazines which give reviews and estimates of films and enable one to pick what he wishes to see. We might also empower the State Department to preview films to be shipped abroad and to prohibit shipment if the picture misrepresents the country or is likely to undermine good will and stir up resentment toward us.

A study of the choice of people of various ages led to the conclusion that the recipe for a "good movie" was "a lot of action with some plot and not too much love". Pictures not considered suitable were those, in which glorification of war, mediocrity, over sentimentality, uncalled-for drinking, unnecessary brutality or killing, passionate love scenes, undue sympathy for immoral or criminal behaviour, superficiality. The motion-picture industry can be a great force for raising

standards and for lowering them. There is a moral obligation upon everyone to see that the films to which they and their dependents are exposed are elevating, not degrading.

4.10 LET US SUM UP

The goods and services distributed by mass media, are probably the most important consumer commodities purchased in the contemporary world. The emotional and mental aspirations are satisfied and fed with these information. Media power to determine what the people read, hear and see or what they want or should have, must not be left entirely to the judgment of a small group of men with a large financial interest in the decision. It has to be ethical oriented. Only by freedom and conflict of ideas can truth in the long run be found. Unless the press, the broadcasting stations, and motion pictures are free channels for information and discussion, there can be little freedom of thought or of expression. Discourse in the public space is fed with facts and news by mass media.

In our discussion of the newspaper, radio and television broadcasting and the movies, we have made some specific suggestions for possible improvement with ethical principles. In the long run, however, the solution may rest with the education, the public schools, the colleges and the Universities. They can help to raise a new generation of young people with higher ethical codes, tastes and expectations. The public must be taught to be discerning and critical of what it reads, hears and sees. Respect for the privacy of individuals, even of those of public figures, is to be upheld with due honour. Privacy could never be tampered in terms of public curiosity which might turn out to be an excuse for mass media to cross their limits. Media ethics regulates life, events and their reporting. The role of mass media could never be undermined as it becomes so essential in contemporary world to bring about healthier society, Nation, Country and the World.

4.11 KEY WORDS

Public interest : dissemination of information about events and news in the world is done with the motive and interest of people who have right to know. It is to be always distinguished from public curiosity to know everything, even sometime private life of persons.

Social responsibility : obligation of mass media to people it serves.

4.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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