

MEDIA ETHICS SUSTAIN AND ENHANCE VERY SCOPE OF FREEDOM

Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao & Ms. P. N. Vasanti*

In no civilized society, notwithstanding its political system, mass media is without some societal compulsions and moral obligations nor, it is without any restraints and responsibilities, as in the case of freedom. Ethical concerns are the far most consideration for all such practices. No profession of any standing is without some such compulsions anywhere in the world. Ethical foundation is what gives a stature and strength for a societal role, particularly where credibility is a principle criteria as in the case of mass media. Ethical practice and norms distinguish rights from wrong and motives and ends. Ethics are an asset, somewhat like stock-in-trade; not a liability neither for media's independence nor for freedom. Ethical concern adds luster to the very scope and standing of freedom in a democracy and respect for it. Checks and balances are there in one form or other to ensure that such values are upheld. That is how codes of ethics are perceived as the "conscience of journalism". The concept of "press freedom" nowhere is without ethical compulsions. In fact, unfettered press without ethical concerns could be a threat to a free society and to its own independence.

As ethical standards are constantly under question not just in India but all over, it is important for the profession that they are discussed and reiterated from time to time. That is how ethics in general and in the context of mass media in particular are constantly debated world over. With the emergence of electronic media – television earlier and satellite broadcasting more recently – media ethics is being viewed in a newer context and has become more complex as operational compulsions of the new media are different. That is why issues to do with media ethics require serious deliberation at various levels within and outside the profession. In today's context, as Mahatma Gandhi wrote "true ethics to be worth its name must... be also good economics". Their balance is what debates help fine tune. Every profession implies certain core values, which shape its functioning and performance. However, in a democratic country such values are derived either from market forces or from self

* Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao is Founder & Chairman and Ms. P. N. Vasanti is Director of Independent Centre for Media Studies (CMS)



imposed standards and codes evolved over the years by the players themselves as in the case of the press. Even a regulatory mechanism by the State does not reduce relevance of media ethics.

Competition calls for media ethics even more

In the last couple of years in particular there has been tremendous growth and expansion of mass media. With it media is being viewed as more powerful than ever before, but at the same time, level of public confidence in media has been on decline as studies have indicated. Even in USA 41 percent think that media has too much freedom (according to a Harper's national poll two years ago). According to a PEW survey recently one-fourth of US citizens believe that news media "distorts" and "manipulates" facts. In India this percentage would not be less. One associated aspect in this context is growing corporationalization of media, causing certain shifts in the paradigm of media operations. This in turn has increased societal concern for declining ethical standards.

Media need to constantly encourage the public to voice grievances against the contents of media and news media in particular. Such a practice implies ethical concern. To give an example for the concern with in, consider what many dailies in USA (like New York Times, Los Angels Times) print prominently every day "if you believe that we have made error, or you have questions about The Time's journalistic standards and practices you may contact James Gold, Reader's representative, by email at..., by phone at... by fax to... or by mail to..." News media in particular are being accused for their arrogance, insensitivity, bias, inaccuracies, sensationalism, stereotypes, trivialization and, for conflict of interest and disappearing line between advertising and news on the one hand, and between news, and views, on the other. This in turn could be said has lead to certain decline in the role and stature of journalists in news establishments and increased role of corporates in setting media priorities. Competitive compulsions and increasing dependence on advertising than ever before has sustained such a trend and added to this concern for ethical standards. In such a scenario market forces are being relied more and more, as if what all attracts people in the media is also in their interest. This is an underlying dilemma today.

If there could be an ethical committee for elected representatives, whether in USA or in India, why media and journalists should not activate ethics panels within.

Recent examples for practicing ethics by mass media as in the case of The New York Times or CBS and the US Congress are worth recalling. While the New York Times publicly apologized for publishing fiction as fact, CBS dismissed six staffers in the Dan Rather controversy after an open enquiry about misleading reporting. Based on Ethical Committee's indictment even a majority leader in the US House of Congress had to resign. They are setting standards for their respective institution for those engaged in ensuring media credibility and enriching democratic practices. The endeavour for ethical standards and practice is to constantly try to do distinctly better and with more responsibility.

There could only be some broad guidelines both for the media corporates and the content operators, that is the journalists. There cannot be specific rules about ethics for any situation. Nevertheless, each opportunity should help make sound decision and empower people in that process to set its own standards, styles and priorities such a way that it becomes a good precedent to help consolidate freedom with responsibility and further the very credibility of media. Overall, and by and large, the Indian media in today's global media scenario may not be the best but certainly not a bad one as to its concern for ethics. In fact, some individual ones are as good or even better as anywhere. All this however should not over look are undermine or hinder positive contribution of news media.

Concern for societal impact is the bed rock for media ethics

Towards sustaining media ethics there could be certain broad principles. First and foremost concern that should become a bedrock for media ethics is a realization that media has effects on the concerned and larger public and also has long-range implications of what appears in media today. A second corrective is separation of advertising function (and interests) from that of editorial. In this regard the US television channels, although their model is not something that fits Indian socio-economic scenario, have recently taken a good initiative. For, unlike in the earlier years, they distinguish a "paid programme" from the rest prominently and specify when an ad looks like news or a feature as a "paid ad" or a "leased access" content and, in fact, even simultaneously disclaim questionable contents. In India we are increasingly facing this dilemma - both in the case of news channels and newspapers. A third area which often prompts an ethical dilemma and increasingly so is mix up of interests of media corporates with those of editorial. Transparency



both in news reporting and media operations help avoid misperceptions about media and improves media credibility.

Participation of readers or viewers and actively in whatever manner is yet another more lasting way of coping with this eternal issue of media ethics. A more recent trend with the newspapers, for example, is certain decline in the space for letter to editors. Another change that I noticed in USA recently is a deliberate effort to elicit readers feedback for every section of newspaper and devote more space. In fact, some of them now position readers' views prominently however critical it may be of what the newspaper itself has published. A recent example is what The New York Times did in the wake of media reporting of New Orleans calamity. It devoted half a page to admit a critic's view as to how the newspaper failed over time reporting about possibility of such a flooding. Such a self-introspection is a rare with Indian media. The only case in India a couple of years ago was that an editor of a big daily had to go on being accused of palgarising. Without such initiatives at various levels, it amounts to missing an opportunity to further confidence in media.

Taking responsibility for the contents, which includes owing lapses of any kind and correcting promptly is another ethical practice which helps set good atmosphere for media credibility. There are very few examples one could recall of media acknowledging something adverse they were responsible for and which they could have avoided or corrected. This is despite that accountability to readers or viewers is something most media accepts in principle.

It is more a few spoiling for the many!

Some media institutions are acknowledged for maintaining high standards. Some also have good intentions but more for the record. Such proclamations are of course a good starting point. But mere endorsement do not mean much, unless practiced consistently. It is the performance at individual as well as together is how media ethics get reflected or otherwise. Big media have added responsibility to set examples in such situations as to professional standards and the best of values that need to be emulated. Since big media dominate the industry bodies, they are in a better position to take initiatives. So that media ethics does not come under questioning.

Pro-active initiatives needed to ensure media ethics

As the issue of media ethics is becoming increasingly complex it should no longer



be confined to editors or journalists. In fact, it should not be left only to them and, even more, to media corporates. As the problem is one of a few spoiling it for the many, professional associations or bodies have a particular responsibility to minimize the scope for such a tendency. Initiatives and interventions are needed from three different levels parallelly. Apart from those from within the media, the civil society and the educational system should be concerned about media ethics and also do something about it. More specifically, in India we need more forums for discussion on the role and impact of media on the society and in the competitive scenario. Media watch groups should operate with civil society representatives at national and regional levels. The best bet for any issue to do with media is active and more discriminative readers and viewers. This also amounts to breaking the "trap of ratings" that media is often under these days. This trap of rating of contents makes the country believe that what interests the people to watch momentarily is also in their interest. This has been reduced to level of daily "popularity contest". This vicious circle requires an informed and engaged citizenry. Media literacy in a more serious and sustained manner at different level helps such a process.

Educational stream in the country, including at the University level, does not offer any scope to be sensitive in media use, media dynamics and about media effects. The journalism schools all across owe to the country to do something about in this respect. They need to assess ethical practices and come up with posers on contentious issues based on research and experimentations. They need to have more active linkage with practicing professions than at present. Case studies and workshops based on such examples are needed. University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication, a premier institution in USA, has introduced Walter Cronkite awards for excellence in political reporting by television channels. An objective of these awards is promote objective and ethical concerns in covering politics. We at CMS were fortunate to be invited for the September 2005 Awards function and also for the luncheon meeting with Walter Cronkite. Walter Cronkite, the most trusted broadcast newsperson USA ever had also observed that news media should guard against entertainment in the news and that otherwise "it amounts to cheating the public". He cautioned that corporate broadcasters are paying more attention to Wall Street than to the health of democracy and at the cost of limiting themselves. Our own Rajdeep Sardesai made similar introspective observations recently at the CMS-AP Press Academy roundtable on "Should there be a Lakshmanrekha for News Media". The more such an introspection the better it is for ensuring ethical concerns.



Even more important and urgent is that various functionaries and their professional bodies like the Editors' Guild, journalist unions, etc. have to be more visible as to their concern for ethical standards and practices. For, only then "a few spoiling it for the many" tendency could be addressed. They could take on projects on ethics in specific contexts, as in the case of reporting stock markets, and undertake introspection of media's functioning. Self-scrutiny is next best bet for ensuring and sustaining good practices and ensuring ethical concerns in the media. Eventually, it is the degree of professionalism and responsibility being exercised by those in the media, which tell upon the level of freedom and independence of media. A few individual editors and journalists periodically do raise the issue but never gets followed up. In fact, even when a Prime Minister or the President of the country raise such issues to do with media performance, it hardly provokes. Wondering whether there are any professional codes of conduct in journalism, Prime Minister Dr. Man Mohan Singh raised last month (at The Tribune's 125 years function) the issue of ethics and responsibilities of news media in a provocative way. Promptly responding, the Editors' Guild has taken up the task of looking into the trend referred to by the Prime Minister at Chandigarh. The larger issue raised by the Prime Minister to do with impact of competition on journalistic practices too deserve serious national debate. This is what the independent CMS has been advocating and also pursuing for some time now.

In sum up it could be said that ethical practices are never a hindrance. More often ethical practices strengthen core values and foundations although some time it may appear limiting the options. Ethical considerations rarely restrain or constrain freedom at any level. On the contrary, freedom gets enriched and becomes more responsible. Media sustains its credibility and societal status from being concerned about ethical implications.

