

Ethics and Media

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Media is the mirror of the times and the society we live in. It reflects the happenings and events of the society that has been witnessing constant changes over the time. It brings to us a world full of happenings, and helps connect with the world we live in. Thanks to a plethora of media that living in one corner of the globe doesn't hamper our desire to enlighten ourselves with the happenings on the other corner. Rather it widens our horizon and nourishes our ideas and thoughts. Media thus has a tremendous impact on the way a society conducts itself in the present, as well as the shape it would take in the future.

The media should be more responsible and accountable for they have the power to influence the public psyche. But it seems like every industry, media too is governed by one principle: SELLING. Media which started as a mission has gradually turned into an industry which like any other business works for profit. And in this rat race of making profit i.e competing for increased TRP ratings and circulation numbers, it has some where somehow chosen to either ignore the ethics of the profession or has actually forgotten to draw the line.

Some of the areas where the media seems to have compromised with ethics are:

1. Paid News

Since the days of India's freedom struggle, the media has been recognised as sensitive, patriotic and a very influential tool in the socio-political sphere. The Father of the Nation, Mahatama Gandhi initiated his movement with the moral power of active journalism. However, a cancer in the form of paid news that has been diagnosed with the Indian media in the recent past has tarnished Media's image. A report on paid news by the Press Council of India has indicted many publishers and broadcasters of taking money for reporting on state assembly elections in 2004 and 2009; praising one candidate while maligning others; which had a significant effect on the voting results.

The report says, "It is widely believed that many media companies, irrespective of the volume of their businesses and their profitability, were 'selling' news space after arriving at an 'understanding' with politicians and representatives of corporate entities that were advertisers. Space in publications and airtime were occupied by advertisements that were disguised as 'news'."

This raises serious questions on the moral conduct of the Indian journalists who are, by and large, honoured and accepted as the torch bearers

in the society and considered as the fourth pillar of democracy. And why only the journalists, people at the editorial and management level too seem to be equal partners or may be the commanding force in the job.

2. Reporting crime and police investigation

Bringing crime stories and police investigation to the forefront definitely keeps the citizens aware and alert about the ills and evils of the society, and reinforces their faith in the police. However, reports containing details of the crime and the police investigation alerts the criminals too. They become cautious of the steps taken by the police and accordingly plan an intelligent escape adding challenges to the police, and posing a grave threat to the public.

3. Sensationalism

The trend of blowing up the inconsequential or sensationalising has become quite a handy tactic for most of the media houses to grab the circulation numbers and TRP ratings. Now be it an off-political argument between two politicians, be it a gay couple sharing a room or slip-off of a fashion model from the ramp, the story scripted for these 'not so newsy' stories takes them to a different level all together. Compelled to drive viewership, channels are even going to the extent of hiring stand-up comedians, inviting astrologers to the studio for viewer phone-ins and putting up dance, music and sometimes even reality based shows. In such a case, media is not only losing its credibility but also seems to have been distorting its very purpose in the society.

4. Undue attention to celebrities and popular figures

Though film stars and sports icons have been constant source of inspiration for all of us in some or the other way, media seems to have gone way beyond it. The treatment of stories of

unnecessary details of these celebrities is so often that sometimes even the plight or the success story of a common man goes unnoticed or unreported. News is not about what beauty regime does an actress follow or how often does a sports star visit his favourite restaurant, news is how a citizen fights for his rights and exposes the government neglect. Unfortunately, bitten by the bug of TRP and circulation, media is chasing and overcovering these issues.

5. Exaggeration and losing credibility

Be it a simple story of a conflict in a college campus or a sensitive story of a conflict between the government and the red rebels, or say a communal conflict, media tends to take sides instead of reporting both the sides in equal light. As a result, this aggravates the situation and leads to a series of more conflicts which, however, again falls to media's advantage. Moreover, India having quite a delicate social fabric comprising of multi religious, multilingual and multi ethnic denominations, the journalists should stop showing favouritism and stop exaggerating as well, or else it will disturb the equilibrium of the society and lose public faith and confidence.

6. Privacy

According to the guidelines of the Press Council of India, intrusion or invasion in the privacy of the individuals is not permissible unless outweighed by genuine overriding public interest, not being a prurient or morbid curiosity. However, the journalists too often run over people's private lives. The paparazzi follows the celebrities wherever they go and are too hungry to capture their moments and movements. It is true that celebrities are public figures and their private moments interest people, but like any other human being they too have the right to privacy and lead life with dignity. But this becomes difficult when intimate details of a person's life, his or her

innermost thoughts, fears and desires are exposed to public gaze by the media, despite knowing that they are not of legitimate public concern. Media may gain monetary benefits out of stories such as newly married star couple's honeymoon but in the long run it loses public confidence and respect.

Although the period after Independence has witnessed a considerable degradation of ethics in media, the basic values adhered to by the Indian media over the ages, still continue to inspire. The media has always risen to the situation whenever there is a crisis.

However, in this era of new journalism that is booming with information and mindboggling entertainment, with global invasion and competition becoming too inevitable, the need of the hour is sober introspection by the journalists and not losing the focus on the paramount duty of the media to be the fourth estate without making any compromise with vested interest.

Quoting the words of reaction of Ashish Bagga, President of Indian Newspaper Society

in the context of the Press Council of India's move to bring the electronic media under its control, "Press in India is time-tested and self-regulated with enough maturity to continue to play the crucial role of the fourth estate of our vibrant democracy responsibly." But with the media giving instances of intentionally compromising with the ethics to its advantage, and the Press Council of India claiming self-regulation to be oxymoron, it is high time the media realises its social and moral responsibility, and stops quenching its thirst for the ugly and the unwanted, that may elevate them to an illusionary height but in the long run pose a question on its credibility.

So let us hope that the Media acts as a mirror that reflects the society, and not a lens that magnifies certain things and minimizes others, although both reflect images.

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