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Media Ethics: Practical Applications and Solutions

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Abstract : *The topic “Media Ethics” comes under the purview of Applied Ethics. Media is an indispensable pillar of democracy. It is a very important instrument in nation building. It is considered as the fourth pillar of democracy. In present times, mass media has become all the more important because it makes us aware of various activities from fields like politics, sports, finance, society etc. It is like a mirror which shows bare truth. Media plays a crucial role in shaping public minds and democracy. So, it is important that it functions according to the moral code of conduct in order to strengthen democracy. In recent times, Indian media has been subject to a lot of criticism for the manner in which they have disregarded*

their obligation to social responsibility. Dangerous business practices in the field of media have affected the fabric of Indian democracy. It should follow a certain code of ethics so that the news that they present will be true and unbiased. This research work has been undertaken with the objective to find out where media is lacking and what is the reason behind it and to suggest the solutions to the problems prevailing in media. It was found that media is suffering from sensationalism, checkbook journalism, twisting of facts, media trials, etc. Hence, as an ethical guide to all the problems of the society, philosophy guides it and suggests ethical remedies to the mass media like showing right things in an unbiased and unprejudiced manner without any selfish motives and respect the privacy of an individual. The media professionals should be ethically-oriented and must have a patriotic fervor.

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Introduction:

Professional Ethics has gained considerable importance in recent times. Professional code of Ethics is not only significant but is also necessary in the interest of the public as it prescribes the moral principles governing the behavior of the professionals and sets the boundaries within which they have to operate.

The topic Media Ethics comes under the umbrella of Applied Ethics. The term 'Media Ethics' is made up of

two terms i.e., Media and Ethics. Media is defined as “one of the means or channels of general communication in society, as newspapers, radio, television etc.” Ethics is derived from a Greek word ‘Ethica or Ethos’ which means customs, traditions and habits. Customs and habits are related to human behaviour. Hence, Ethics is related to human conduct or behavior. Media Ethics is a system of moral principles that apply value judgment to the practice of media. As an academic discipline, Ethics is the study of morality. It is a careful and systematic reflection on the values and analysis of moral decisions and behavior whether of the past, present and future. Morality is value dimension of human decision-making and behavior. Ethics provides ethical standards for people to decide or behave appropriately as per the circumstances. Applied Ethics is a branch of Philosophy which applies ethical standards to different fields of study.

Y.V. Satyanarayana is of the view that an ethical debate between ethics in general and ethics as applied to various issues of social life is more useful to make moral decisions and to find out solutions to ethical problems at the practical level. Thus, Applied Ethics is a part of the broader study of ethics; and it deals with moral issues and dilemmas that confront individuals and societies and finding solutions to the moral problems by rational means(Satyanarayana, 2010).

Power of ‘Journalism’ has grown over a period of time. It has become a coveted profession for the present day career conscious youth. The fundamental objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views, comments and information on matters of public interest in a fair, accurate, unbiased and decent manner and language. The press is an indispensable pillar of democracy. It purveys public opinion and shapes it. Parliamentary democracy can flourish only under the watchful eyes of the media. Media not only reports but acts as a bridge between the state and the public. At a time when globalization of Indian economy has brought about drastic change in the mediascape and the Indian press is also going global, the responsibility of the press to safeguard the interest of the people and the nation has increased manifold. With the advent of private TV channels, media seems to have taken over the reins of human life and society in every walk of life. Media today does not remain satisfied as the Fourth Estate; it has assumed the foremost importance in society and

governance. Such is the influence of media that it can make or unmake any individual, institution or any thought.

Media cannot lose sight of its duties and obligations. Journalism is a profession that serves the society. This privilege includes the right to collect information from primary authentic sources, which are of use and importance to the society or the nation and then report the same in an unbiased and positive way with the aim to inform and not to create sensation and harm the public. Any direct or indirect interference from state, the owner or other sector is encroachment on its freedom to discharge its duties towards the society. However to enjoy these privileges, Media is mandated to follow certain ethics in collecting and disseminating information viz., ensuring authenticity of the news, use of restrained and socially acceptable language for ensuring objectivity and fairness in reporting and keeping in mind its cascading effect on the society and on the individuals and institutions concerned. Ethics is a code of values, which govern our lives, and are thus very essential for moral and healthy life. In the context of the press, “Ethics” may be described as a set of moral principles or values, which guide the conduct of journalism: Media Ethics is essentially the self-restraint to be practised by the journalists voluntarily, to preserve and promote the trust of the people and to maintain their own credibility and not betray the faith and confidence of the people.

Significance of Study:

- Media is an indispensable pillar of democracy. So, it is important that it functions according to the moral code of conduct in order to strengthen democracy.
- Media can help raise a new generation of young people with higher ethical codes, tastes and expectations.

Objective:

The present study aims:

- To highlight the nature, role and important aspects of Ethics in Media.
- To know how far media has fulfilled its role in the society.
- To find out where media is lacking and what is the reason behind it.

- To suggest the solutions to the problems prevailing in the mass media.

Methodology:

- Data for the project are collected from different articles and reports on Media Ethics.
- Study of various books related to Ethics and Mass Media.
- Study of different journals and magazines, audio and visual documents and Internet has been done.

Code of Ethics for Media:

The Code of Ethics are general principles adopted by media professionals in understanding the difference between 'right' and 'wrong' and in applying that understanding to their decisions. It outlines the mission and values of the institution, how professionals are supposed to approach problems, the ethical principles based on the institution's core values and the standards to which the profession is held. It is also referred to as the ethical code which encompasses areas such as Business Ethics, Medical Ethics, Environmental Ethics, etc. are supposed to follow. When institutions adhere to the code of ethics they send a message that universal compliance is expected from every employee. Breaking the code of ethics can result in termination or dismissal from the organisation. The code also states that the media should be **honest, fair, and courageous** in gathering, reporting, and interpreting information. P. Singer is of the view that we can find ethical ramifications in most of our choices if we look hard enough (Singer, 1993).

Media should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. '**Deliberate distortion of facts is never permissible.**'
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- **Identify sources whenever feasible.** The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions

attached to any promise made in exchange for information. **Keep promises.**

- Make certain headlines, news teasers, and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites, and quotations which do not misrepresent. **Media should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.**
- **Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible for label montages and photo illustrations.** Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- **Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information** except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.
- **Never plagiarize.**
- **Give voice to the voiceless;** official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- **Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, or social status.**
- **Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting.** Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or content.

Freedom of Press and Right of Privacy:

Freedom of Press or Freedom of Media is the principle that communication and expression through various media, including print and electronic media, especially published materials, should be considered a right to be exercised freely. Such freedom implies the absence of interference from an overreaching state; its preservation may be sought through constitutional or other legal protections. Freedom of speech and expression is one of the important pillars of democracy. Free expression is indispensable to the unadulterated exchange of thoughts and ideas needed to regulate the democratic machinery in India. These free thoughts lead to ideas that formulate public policy. There is need for

free expression so as to build political stability and check abuse of power by public officials. Freedom of press can be said to be a subset of freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of expression is very important for democracy and fundamental to the media. The idea of freedom is to engage in free expression and reception of ideas and opinions in various media is essential to human development. It is one of the principal theories of media and is fundamental to democracy. This is true; however journalism in the current media age is proving to be consistently intrusive and the free speech or public interest defense ever less plausible.

Privacy is a fundamental human right which must be enjoyed by every person. To define privacy is much like defining one's state of being. Privacy is a basic human and reasonable expectation of every person. Individuals must be protected against intrusion into his personal life or affairs or those of his family, by direct physical means or by publication of information. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution lays down that no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law. Media should respect the privacy of the individuals even the public figures. Privacy should never be tampered in terms of public curiosity. **There should be freedom of the press but there is also a need for self regulation.** Media should adhere to the professional code of conduct and ethics and government may have a role to play if under certain circumstances public interest is hampered.

Social Responsibility and the Media:

The social responsibility of the press is an important phenomenon. It is highly considered as one of the valuable features of the press. The term "**Social Responsibility**" was first used by the **Hutchins Commission appointed by the British Government in 1947. A responsible press is one which subordinates self-interest in the interest of the public.** The press in newly developing countries like India must decide to formulate and follow a pattern that is flexible and changes with time. India is already considered to be one of the nations which have a sufficiently developed media; yet there is need for the application of ethical principles on the press: **Responsibility can never be undertaken without an**

ethical foundation. The development of a responsible press depends on how well the concept of the press is understood by the public and the government. There is need for intelligent planning of the objective and the goals, rules of operation, code of ethics, self-discipline, etc. to go a long way towards establishing a responsible press which may not need official restrictions.

These responsibilities include:

- (a) Media has the responsibility to ensure that the information they broadcast should not be biased or tampered in a way to boost their TRPs.
- (b) It has the responsibility to stay loyal and honest to its country and its citizens.
- (c) It is the responsibility of the media that it should present the facts as they are and should not be prejudiced.
- (d) It is the moral responsibility of the media that it should not be in favour of any particular individual or political party.
- (e) Media has the responsibility to ensure that there is no infringement of the privacy of an individual. It should respect the privacy of any individual even those of public figures.

Maladies in Mass Media:

Media informs the people on what is happening around. It interprets the issues for the benefit of the people on various schemes, plans and programmes of the government. It entertains people through various art and culture forms. It also evaluates the functioning of the systems in the society. The media particularly the press, the radio, the television and the cinema together or independently have the potential to either reform or deform the society. Mass media has ethical responsibility of being only what they represent themselves to be. The following points reflect the maladies prevalent in the mass media:

1. **Sensationalism:** There are elements of sensationalism in mass media. Over the years, there has been a shift towards lifestyle, celebrities, entertainment at the expense of more traditional "Hard" news stories.
2. **Checkbook Journalism:** Another ethical ailment prevailing in the field of media is "Checkbook Journalism." This implies the

practice of paying for stories that people formerly gave freely out of a desire for publicity or to share information. The subjects of the news stories are bribed to sell their 'true confession.'

3. **Twisting of Facts:** The owners of print and private electronic channels are the owners of either a business establishment or an industrial house or a financial institution. News in the hands of these businessmen naturally becomes a commodity. **News which should be a bare fact is nowadays angled or slanted to make it marketable.**
4. **Media wants stories in place of plain news based on facts.** Instead of focusing on the basic problems of the people, media seeks to divert attention from them and instead highlights bollywood, lives of filmstars, cricket, babas, astrology, reality shows, etc. It is therefore, often said **“Bad news is good news and good news is no news.”**
5. **Trial by media:** The trial by media generally is in criminal cases, where media creates the perceptions of guilt or innocence of the accused, in the mind of people regarding the crime, even before the courts have passed a judgement or sometimes even before the trial commences. Because of this the right of an accused for fair trial is encroached on.

Ethical Remedies for Maladies in Media:

The maladies in mass media are problematic as they affect society directly and indirectly. The following remedies will enable us to take care of the people of the society from the problems prevalent in the mass media:

1. The mass media has an obligation to the society to show **right things, right thoughts, right guidelines and right behaviour.**
2. **Whenever 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.

3. Suppression of personal misbehaviour of a particular individual, for which one is duly punished, is recommended without exaggerating it to be an important news item. **Generalising an individual's wrong doing as belonging to a particular community, state, religion, or country, is unwarranted.** Equality before law guarantees that wrong doer will be punished without any discrimination or preference.
4. **Whenever an exaggeration of fact is necessary, the mass media can do it only 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 due to violation of the rule of wearing helmet could possibly be exaggerated so as to create awareness among people to protect themselves.

Conclusion:

Having discussed the importance of media, maladies afflicting it and the solutions to these maladies, we come to the conclusion that media is the sword arm of democracy. Media acts as a watchdog to protect public interest against and create public awareness. As the fourth pillar of democracy along with judiciary, executive and legislature, media today has an all embracing role to act against the injustice, oppression, misdeeds and partiality of our society. Media helps in fighting against corruption, nepotism, cronyism of institutional machinery and carrying out relentless campaign against them. The power of mass media, particularly the visual media is so powerful that nobody, however powerful he may be, can escape from its iron grips.

But roses have thorns too and the media is no exception. Media can cause national and international strife and jeopardize the harmony and social balance with its biased and motivational coverage. This is because media houses are controlled by media barons, industrial powerhouses, corporate giants and government dictators. In order to effectively cater to their interests and policies they spread news and information fuelling hatred and anarchy. Media professionals seek to have name and fame and in the process forget the duty of neutral journalism.

In a bid to improve their TRP, almost all the channels are after a rat race of making sensational news. Thus, non issues become issues and without any proper homework, programmes are broadcast. There is widespread manipulation and distortion of facts. Several instances of yellow journalism in recent past have focused on paid news and a collusion of politicians and journalists. Often media is engaged in trivial matters that appeal to masses forgetting the real issues that haunt the nation. There are several good things happening in this nation of a billion. It is important for media to expose the corrupt and the evil and it is equally important to highlight the achievements and success. It is only positivism that can install a spirit of optimism in India. Then only the society as a whole will be able to face challenges more successfully to build up a developed nation. 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 healthy changes in society, nation, country and the world'

Suggestions:

There are challenges in front of us but solution to every problem is available. Every problem has a resolution, the end is to find it and practise it. Here are few suggestions to deal with the problems which are prevalent in mass media.

- Media should be unbiased. It is important for the media to ensure that the information that they are broadcasting should not be biased or tampered in any way to boost their TRP.
- Media should be unprejudiced. It should not have any preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.
- Media's 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 ethically oriented.

- Respect for the privacy of individuals, even of those of public figures, should be upheld with due honour. Privacy should never be encroached to satisfy public curiosity.
- Media should be free from pressures of any external agencies. 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.
- Media should have patriotic fervour. It should be loyal and honest towards its nation.

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