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**AN ANALYSIS ON THE PARTICIPATION AND  
ETHICS OF NEWS MEDIA WITH RELIGIOUS  
IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

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# An Analysis on the Participation and Ethics of News Media with Religious Identity in Contemporary India

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**Abstract – This paper explores the concept of media ethics with special reference to the Indian news media. In India media ethics have been a convention associated with the traditional mass media. But with the development in technology and the advent of the internet the standard ethical practices are facing continuous challenge. This paper discusses three incidents where the traditional mass media - the press or television - deviated from the established ethical principles and journalistic norms normally practiced by the Indian news media. This paper will explore those aberrations and analyze the ethical principles of the news media that has been manipulated for a more worldly purpose. The paper draws conclusion on the future of media ethics in the context of Indian news media.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The news media are in crisis across the developed world. Journalism as we know it is being described, obviously with some exaggeration, as 'collapsing', 'disintegrating', in 'meltdown'. In this digital age, there is gloom in most developed country, or 'mature', media markets over the future of newspapers and also broadcast television. Two decades after a call issued from a conference in Windhoek, Namibia for the establishment of World Press Freedom Day, 'the arrival of the digital revolution – the evolution of the Internet, the emergence of new forms of media, and the rise of online social networks – has reshaped the media landscape and made "the press" of 2011 something that those gathered in Windhoek in 1991 could not have imagined'. There is a strong sense that 'the news industry is no longer in control of its own future' and that it is technology companies like Google and the social media that lead the way and look set to hegemonize the public space that once belonged to the news media.

The global financial crisis and economic slowdown of 2008-2009 sent several western media organizations into a tailspin. Advertising revenues, the lifeline of the newspaper industry, took a body blow during this period. Many big newspapers, whose strengths had been sapped and whose situational advantages had been undermined over the years, went into bankruptcy or protection against bankruptcy. The New York Times was bailed out by an emergency loan of US \$250 million from Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim: 'to help the newspaper company finance its businesses'. Tens of thousands of journalists lost their jobs in the United

States, where newsrooms are 30 per cent smaller than in 2000, and across Europe.

There was a clear sense in the Vienna gathering that a historical era for the news media was coming to an end and they had entered, even if differentially across the world, an indeterminate period of uncertainty. With the changes in audience behaviour and news consumption accompanying the migration to the web and to mobile platforms gathering pace, the big challenge for the traditional news business is engagement of the audience that is getting away, with grim financial implications.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that involves recommendations on right and wrong conduct. Media ethics is a topic for discussion for nearly a century. As the influence, impact and existence of media have become widespread its moral stance and adherence to ethical codes have become important issues. Ralph. E. Hanson<sup>1</sup> (2015) has stated that media ethics is a complex topic because it deals with an institution that must do things that ordinary people in ordinary circumstances would not do. Media ethics deals with the specific ethical principles and moral standards of all forms of media including print, broadcast, film, theatre, advertising and the internet.

The ethics of journalism is one of the most well defined branches of media ethics and is often the most discussed one. The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics<sup>2</sup> has four main tenants: a) Seek truth and report it, b) Minimize harm, c) Act independently and d) Be accountable and transparent. The subject of ethics in journalism has to

deal with a variety of things like manipulation of content (by governments, corporates or by journalists themselves or their organizations), distinction between public interest and privacy of individuals or confidentiality (for guarding the rights of individuals or securing national interests), and conflict with the law of the land regarding protection of news sources.

In democratic countries like India although the freedom of the media is constitutionally enshrined and have precise legal definition and enforcement, the exercise of that freedom by individual journalists is subject to several clauses like the perspective of the media proprietor, the resources available for reporting any event or incident, the perspective of the readers or audience as well as the related reporter and thereby ethics of the concerned journalists. In modern democracies effective communication channels in the form of mass media are imperative for ensuring accountability of the elected representatives and transparent governance. Today the mass media is inevitable to the extent that if freedom of media disappears, so would most political accountability. But the question that exists in most situations is whether the constitutional freedom can be exercised in all its earnestness given the other hurdles confronting the journalists. Here the ethical concerns and values assume significance. The key principles of ethics in such situations is elucidated by Plaisance (2009)<sup>3</sup>, "Idealism - how strongly we feel about the pursuit of humanitarian goals and Relativism –the belief that the only way we can decide what's right and what's not is to rely on our own experiences and internal moral 'compass'.<sup>3</sup>But embedded in these principles are the assumptions that journalists would be objective, be committed to the truth, avoid sensationalism and operate without external pressures.

The traditional news disseminating media like the newspapers, radio and television faced with such a versatile and societal opponent is using innovative news disseminating techniques, depending on sensational even scandalous news items, racking up issues that were previously considered in bad taste for the news media or were outside the domain of public interest and therefore left untouched. There are a few advantages of a more assiduous and over-active press and television news media. It means that more issues now become the prerogative of the news media, issues which were left unscathed for all these years. It also means that perhaps with the widening of the ambit more people, more sections, more groups who were not represented earlier get reflected in the news items or stories dished out by the press and news channels. But the compulsion to out shine competition can weigh heavily on moral and ethical responsibilities. The study will discuss on the ethical standards of news journalism in the traditional mass media of India in the face of new market forces.

## PARTICIPATION OF NEWS CHANNELS

Ever since the advent of satellite television, there has been a proliferation of news channels. NDTV, Star News, Times Now, Headline News are some of the channels that deliver a twenty four hour news service on the hour every hour seven days a week. It seems intuitive, then, to assume that the presentation of news would have some effect on the direction of political and societal discourse.

Schroder & Phillips speak of the binary focus that most studies on media and political power have i.e. is it the politicians who steer the media representation of social and political reality ,or whether it is the media that impose their own definitions of political events , actors and institutions on the public agenda (2007). "The implication of this binary focus", they say, "is that whoever succeeds in overruling the definitional efforts of the other -media or politicians-will control public opinion." They question then is, if it is possible, that the citizens themselves, the smallest unit of democratic societies, have no power of their own over the public agenda, apart from the power to construct their own agenda of socially relevant topics by selecting from the agenda offered by the media. They further question if the citizens do in any way have any power over the discursive framing of social issues into public meanings and values or do they merely have a responsive, reactive role in relation to the menus and diets set up by the media. Their study was conducted in Danish society and is a model that could perhaps be emulated to some extent in studying the influence of news media (television or otherwise) in the Indian social context.

How do we then go about analyzing the effect that mainstream news media (in this case television news channels) have in affecting the direction for political and societal discourse? Following Schroder and Phillips' model, we can perhaps conclude that rather than any direct or immediate impact that media have in determining who the people vote for in a parliamentary election for example, the impact of media is in fact much more complex. As their own study indicates it is far from clear what role media play with regard to the democratic literacy and civic engagement of the citizenry. According to Schroder and Phillips, their view of mediatization suggests that media discourses set boundaries for what is understood as 'politics' in society, as the media represent a central source of knowledge and experience. But, at the same time, media discourses are saturated by the ways in which citizens talk about politics, since journalists and media sources draw on discourses that circulate in society (2007).This is a view corroborated in the work of Gamson et al (1992).

We are then perhaps led to conclude within the limits of research conducted that the influence of media is a two way process. But even if the journalists and others draw on the discourse within society itself , the end product , with the emphasis on reducing everything to a two-minute sound bite and broadcasting only the most sensational part of a story, diminishes everything

into a two-dimensional version of events that are in fact far more complex.

## **RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

Now, I would like to turn to the curious case of the religious channels. The question of the religious channels poses quite a few conceptual problems regarding notions of secularism and religion itself. It has emerged from several studies that the channels are proliferating and that they are also attracting a loyal following. There has been a steady growth in the number of viewers. According to studies by the TAM media research group, a 100% of the viewers of GOD TV belong in the 35+ age group and 46% of Aastha's were below 35; while 53% of QTV viewers were below the age of 35.

Many of the channels advertise themselves as lifestyle or spiritual channels. Aastha, the first in the genre, advertises itself as India's "number one spiritual cultural channel". Sanskar advertises itself as a cultural channel. However, there is no denying that these channels have a variety of programmes, all of which are of a religious nature ranging from sermons and lectures by various religious figures to question and answer shows where everything from problems of interpretation of scripture to questions related to daily life are addressed. Aastha for example has live telecasts of Bhagwat Katha readings, bhajans and discourses by such "experts" as Sadhvi Ritambhara, a figure who has long been associated with the right-wing Hindutva groups.

According to Indiantelelevision.com, GOD TV claims to "...offer a new breed of international Christian programming, including cutting-edge conferences, in depth interviews and youth and music shows, featuring prominent Christian leaders and artists from around the world." Quran TV or QTV catering to the Muslims among the populace claims to produce programmes based on the "Ahl e Sunnat Wal Jama'at school of thought in Islam". Channels such as Aastha, Sanskar, GOD TV, MiracleNet, Islamic Channel, Q TV and others form the daily viewing experience of many. As Pradip Ninan Thomas says, "The marketing of Paradise is big business today. God sells." (p x, 2008) Rajagopal's main concern was that a programme of an overtly religious nature was being broadcast on State sponsored television. On the surface of it, the problem seems clear enough in that if a State claims to be secular how does it then sponsor such public displays of religion. This once again poses the problem of how secularism is perceived by the Indian State. If secularism in the Indian context means that the State is equidistant from all religious groups, then surely there is no problem posed. But in this post-Doordarshan era, this concern would then become irrelevant perhaps. In the era of globalization and privatization of television channels, it is not feasible or

advisable for the State to gag private enterprise. The Cable Television Networks Act of 1995 makes it clear that no programmes that could create tensions between communities are to be broadcast. I would like to submit here that perhaps it would be difficult to determine just what such programming would entail unless the programmes themselves are explicit in their content which is rarely, if ever, the case. Even more problematic is I think that in any circumstance it would be difficult to assess just what factors trigger an outbreak of violence.

## **VIOLATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES BY THE INDIAN MEDIA**

We know that the distinctive features of news writing are accuracy, precision, impartiality, objectivity and public accountability. Yet these "canons of journalism" has come under serious threats in recent times. The news organizations and the reporters and broadcasters overlook and sometimes disregard the "code of ethics" in the acquisition of newsworthy information and its subsequent dissemination to the public. This can be because of a variety of reasons like evoking sensationalism, increasing readership and viewership, pressure from proprietors, coercion from powerful and useful news sources and selective diffusion and retention of news items by journalists themselves due to one or several of the previously stated reasons.

Let us consider the first example. Most journalistic code of ethics comprises the principle of "limitation of harm". This involves the withholding of certain details from news reports like the names of minor children, crime victims or information not relevant to particular news reports, the release of which might harm someone's reputation or life or impede the function of the administration. The Aarushi murder case that set off a media frenzy is a case in point. A teenager girl named Aarushi Talwar was murdered along with a domestic servant of her house in a posh Delhi locality in 2008. The double murder case came under intense media scrutiny with the manner and grammar of the coverage triggering a debate on the limits of the media. The media pronounced guilt and innocence without proper corroboration by the concerned authority.

Media's constant pressure forced the investigating agency (the CBI) to take the help of the Supreme Court which passed a restraining order barring the media from any scandalous or sensational reporting on the case. Justice Altamas Kabir stated<sup>7</sup> "We are asking the press not to sensationalize something which affects reputations." But the broadcast media and the press cannot be unilaterally blamed. The news was in circulation in the internet too and the television channels and newspapers used the technique of "reconstruction" of the crime scene and



incident to accentuate hype and interest of the audience/readers in the issue. The need to sensationalize the news emerged from the need to remain relevant and crucial in the public domain. The ethical norms and legal standards make clear distinction between “in public interest” and “interest to the public”. While the first regards the issues relating to the benefit of the public, the second concerns issues which the public may find interesting. The news items which belong to the second category should be carefully chosen and judiciously presented so that it does not intrude upon the privacy of subjects or impair their reputation. Mass media, being easily available and highly accessible, need to be vigilant and differentiate clearly between what and how much the general public needs to know.

The issues that “interest the public” can become at times become grave threat to the security of individuals and nation. The deviation of the Indian media from established ethical standards is more prominent in the following example. I am talking about the media, especially television coverage during the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai in 2008. The coverage of 26/11 attacks by the television channels in India came under severe criticism for turning a blind eye to the safety of the hostages, the security of the rescuers and above all the national interest. While all the other attack points were freed from terrorists by the 28th morning, the Taj Hotel remained under the control of the terrorists. The television coverage helped the terrorists by showing everything in their live coverage from the vantage point of the rescuers to the possible strategies and measures to be adopted by the National Security Guards in the “Operation Black Tornado” without bothering about the impact it would have on the security concerns and delaying the rescue process. The sensationalism of live coverage of a rescue mission assisted a buoyant viewership which perhaps goaded the news channels to plan their telecast in the said manner. Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)<sup>8</sup> concluded that the newspapers’ coverage of the 26/11 terror attacks was more balanced and ethical than that of electronic media. But this can be attributed to the nature of the print medium which had time to verify and present the relevant facts and stories, unlike the television channels which had to rush with their reports and had to always concentrate on ‘being the first in the race’. Neelamalar, Chitra and Darwin (2009)<sup>9</sup> stated that there was strong opposition to the way the electronic media sensationalized the attacks and a necessity to regulate media content during emergencies was felt. The Indian government chose to respect press freedom and abstained from regulatory measure but the News Broadcasters’ Association (NBA) of India developed a code to be adhered to in the time of emergencies. This instance clearly shows the media’s flouting of ethical norms. The television channels can claim that the live feeds were available in the social networking sites and the internet but there is no doubt that the television was a more prominent presence and the pictures telecast by the TV cameras were uploaded by the social networking sites. The commercial viability of the

transmission in terms of popularity and advertisement sponsorship muted ethical principles. It would be an interesting study to make a quantitative analysis of the advertisement revenues for the national channels at the time of the live telecast.

There have been repeated allegations against the media both press and television for conducting “sting” operations. Though sting operations provide startling revelations that benefit the society because of its exposure of truth, critics have questioned the ethical veracity of the use of the sting tactic for journalistic agenda. The sting operation can be used by the media to expose truths, espouse causes or realize societal agenda but it is attached with falsehood and bias and provides no scope to the victim to defend himself/herself under the circumstances. Such sting operations can unravel the truth but leaves a lot to desire when faced with questions on ethical propriety. The one-sided affair is a blot on the journalistic code of fairness and impartiality.

## TWO MEDIA WORLDS AND INDIA

Let us now turn to the differences in the situation of the news media across the world. These differences, which mirror the larger patterns of the world’s uneven economic and socio-political development, run wide and deep and can even appear dramatic. How long this duality will endure is a matter of conjecture. Let us call this situation ‘The Two Media Worlds’ and see how India figures against this backdrop.

While daily print newspaper circulation has been in decline globally, by 17 per cent between 2006 and 2010 in the United States, 11.8 per cent in western Europe, and 10 per cent in eastern and central Europe, it has risen 16 per cent in the Asia-Pacific region and 4.5 per cent in Latin America over the same period (Riess 2011). With nearly three-fourths of the world’s 100 top-selling daily newspapers now published in Asia, India and China are regarded as ‘the world absolute leaders in the newspaper industry’ (WPT 2009: 6), with current daily circulations in the vicinity of 110 million copies in each case. In India, the growth trends in circulation and readership are especially strong in the Indian language sectors of the press, led by Hindi. But the buoyancy and implications of this development need not be exaggerated, as it comes on the back of extreme underpricing of cover prices and the dumping of hundreds of thousands of copies that go straight to the radhi market.

Side by side, satellite television has been in buoyant growth mode in South Asia, in China, and in other parts of the developing world. In 2011, television households in India are estimated to number 141 million, with 116 million of them served by cable and 26 million by direct-to-home television (TAM 2011).

And since the total number of households in India is estimated to be 231 million, there is considerable space for growth (Ibid.). From a low base, internet use

and broadband access are growing rapidly, although unevenly, across the developing world. China's development in this area has been quite spectacular: it has upwards of 500 million internet users – by far the largest number for any country in the world – most of them served by broadband, minimally defined by western standards (Fu 2011). India, by contrast, has only something like 100 million internet users (Internet World Stats 2011), most of them poorly served by bandwidth. One would think the number would be much higher, given the country's fairly advanced capabilities in the software field but this is typical of India's political economy paradox, large swathes of backwardness amidst high economic growth rates. The most revealing indicator in the comparison is the internet's penetration of the comparable populations:

China's 36.30 per cent, which is still only about half the developed country norm, contrasts sharply with India's 8.40 per cent (Ibid.). What this means is that the impact of the digital revolution on the print press and on broadcast television is considerably stronger and the tipping point is likely to arrive sooner in China than in India.

## THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MEDIA

Conventional wisdom in the west posits a *laissez faire* conception of a libertarian press with unbridled rights that no government and no external agency could be allowed to touch. The social responsibility conception arose in reaction to this posture. In the United States, the first systematic theory of a socially responsible press was presented in 1947 in the report of the Commission on Freedom of the Press, headed by Robert M. Hutchins. The Hutchins Commission lay down five 'standards of performance' for a free and responsible press. These were (1) to provide a 'truthful, comprehensive account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning'; (2) to serve as a 'forum for the exchange of comment and criticism'; (3) to offer a 'representative picture of the constituent groups of society'; (4) to present and clarify the 'goals and values of society'; and (5) to provide 'full access to the day's intelligence' (Lambeth 1986: 7).

The specification of 'standards of performance' needs revision and updating. But there can be little doubt that over the long term the conception of socially responsible news media has been influential and has come to stay. Over the years, a substantial international literature has appeared on templates for socially and ethically accountable journalism and also on the constitutive 'elements of journalism' (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2001). This has yielded codes of practice or professional ethics that have privileged such principles as truth telling, freedom and independence, fairness and justice, humaneness, and working for the social or public good, and emphasized such disciplines as fact-checking, verification, investigation, rigorous data

sourcing and analysis, providing context and meaning, and maintaining perspective.

The Indian situation cries out for such an independent, comprehensive, hard look into the culture, practices, and ethics of the news media and into questions of what kind of regulatory and governance mechanisms need to be put in place. The object must be the same: to support integrity and freedom of the media while encouraging the highest ethical standards and best practices. For too long have India's news media got by on the strength of empiricism and animal spirits, an inchoate realization of their own history, accumulated strengths, capabilities, weaknesses, vices, and unrealized potential, and an approach that is ad hoc and, on most issues, hit-or-miss. They have travelled quite a distance since Independence, with the pace accelerating over the past quarter-century.

What they need to acquire in order to develop further is an active consciousness, a coherent theory of their own role in society, higher professional norms and standards and benchmarking, a better-informed socio-political and ethical side to their practice, a systematic critical monitoring of their own performance, a break with the illusion of self-sufficiency, an internal accountability to higher intellectual standards, a whole-hearted acceptance of social responsibility, a more precise and less breathless style, and a sober advocacy of their own role as an indispensable part of the striving for a democratic and just system.

Nobody knows what the long term holds for India's news media. But if they do not shy away from these challenges and go about these tasks earnestly and intelligently, their immediate and medium-term future can be considered secure and bright.

## CONCLUSION

Journalists have to act independently not only for the sake of maintaining ethical standards but for zealously guarding their freedom and their constitutional rights. Journalists everywhere play a vital role in providing the public with knowledge and understanding. They must therefore remain sensitive to issues such as fairness, accountability and accuracy. Reporters continuously need to ask themselves ethical questions throughout different stages of their investigations and be ready to justify their decisions to editors, colleagues, and the public. Usually, the ethical way of accomplishing tasks is tougher, but all reporters should be willing to confront such a challenge if they want to protect the sanctity of their media. The Indian media has always held a high moral ground in the dissemination of news items.

The several advantages of the new media as discussed in one of the sections of this paper along

with the advances in communication and information technology (ICT) gives it a thrust which the traditional media cannot hope to compete. The high standards of Indian journalism in the past and the acceptability and availability of the mass media at present would ensure the existence of ethical principles in the Indian news media.

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