

CHANGES IN GLOBAL JOURNALISM ETHICS

Sweta Ghosh *

Abstract

Journalism today is facing ethical crisis due to advent of new media technologies. A new definition of journalists has been formed where citizens actively take part in news production. The practice of Journalism is witnessing structural changes in four aspects: economic, narrative, organizational and relationship. Journalists are intruding into the private life to create sensational news. World Wide Web has become a medium of exhibitionism and voyeurism. The media content is mainly controlled by the publishers, advertisers and citizens.

Keywords:

Technology,
Media ethics,
Yellow Journalism,
Right to Non-disclosure,
Structural Changes,
Citizen Journalism,
WikiLeaks

* **Ph.D Scholar, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Calcutta Senate House, Kolkata, India**

1. Introduction

Recently, several book and research articles have been published to point up recent changes in journalistic ethics. Traditionally, journalism is considered to be a profession or practice of gathering information, compiling the information into a story, and disseminating the story as a part of package or alone through print or broadcast media. Traditional journalism is associated with the social responsibility of serving as the “fourth estate,” or a watchdog on the judicial, legislative and executive branches of a democracy (Tsui, 2009, p.54). Journalism as practice, a product and profession is undergoing rapid and dramatic structural changes. Today, Journalism is facing a crisis of ethics which is continuously lowering its standards and question its future as a democratic agent. Traditional journalism is associated with the social responsibility of serving as the “fourth estate,” or a watchdog on the judicial, legislative and executive branches of a democracy.

Several economic and social measures are dejecting the importance of journalistic principles while technology has created a new definition of journalists. The twenty-first century is well known as the age of ethical failures. Our country has experienced such failures in the past; the advent of technology and the interconnectivity associated with globalization have provided a platform from which the world can view these debacles at the same time citizens are affected. Ethical failures now happen in real-time. Previously, it was enough for a set of universal ethics to be broadly applied to an organization to serve as a reactive indicator in the event of a breach. Today, the world has been united like never before. Foreign continents are a mere plane ride away, and information is transferred in micro seconds with the click of a mouse. Technology has united the world and reduced its size, but at same time it also increased failure in ethics (Bishop, 2013, p.637).

2. Ethics in Journalism and Media

Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with actions that are morally permissible and actions that are not (Jadhav, 2012, p.80). “Ethics” comes from the Greek word, ethos, meaning “character” or “personal disposition.” It refers to the manner in which people conduct themselves. “Morals” stems from the Latin “mores,” the customs of a group. Morality as mores is close to the common idea of ethics as conduct according to the rules of a group. Ethics is

concerned about both internal things such as character, and external things such as the rules of society. It is individualistic because individuals are asked to make the rules part of their character and set of values. It is social because ethics is not about every person formulating their own rules (Ward, 2010, pp.11-12).

Ward (2014, p.45) stated that “Media ethics is the responsible use of the freedom to publish, when we do journalism. When we reflect on our work, media ethics is normative interpretation of practice.” Ethics in media constitutes a normative science of conduct applied voluntarily. World over efforts have been made to set ethical guidelines, rules, norms, codes and principles to help journalists to make right choices when they are in a dilemma. Media ethics are applied ethics which deal with the ethical standards of media includes print, broadcast, film, theatre, art forms, internet and traditional media (Jadhav, 2012, pp.80-81). The double image of journalism is a two-sided reality. One in which the two sides contradicts with each other while in other side both sides complement each other. On the one hand journalism is an industry, a major player in the profit-seeking market economy, and journalists are merely workers in that industry, driven by the need to make a living. On the other hand journalism is a profession, a vocation founded in ethical principles which direct and regulate the conduct of the practitioner (Kieran, 2002, pp.3-4). Commercialization Of media and communication content, privacy, right to reply, communal writing, sensational and yellow journalism, freebies and sting operations have raised new ethical concerns (Jadhav, 2012, p.81). Yellow Journalism must be opposed; but Indian journalism doesn't have adequate mechanisms for combating this effectively. Statutory and quasi judicial *body* like Press Council acts as a watchdog of the *press*. Press Council play strong role in maintaining official code of professional ethics, but at the same time strong legal deterrents like high penalties and damages should exist. A court case involving film magazine Stardust witnessed cheap, catty and yellow journalism, which roused a lot of anger among many journalists. One of the staffers wrote an allegedly scurrilous article based on information provided by the “source.” The magazine was sued by Shabana Azmi, film actress whose personal life was the subject of the article in question. The Judge, Sujata Manohar in deference to the plaintiff's plea demanded that the journalist reveal the name of her source, accepting the argument that no ‘public interest’ was involved in this case which might justify non-disclosure of the source (Vanaik, 1987, pp.1789-1790). The case roused many questions regarding Journalism

ethics and Press Freedom. Two separate issues Yellow Journalism and Journalist's Right to Non-disclosure got interlinked. Some journalists got angered as they demanded eradication of sensationalism and wanted to safeguard journalist's right to non-disclosure of source only regarding the cases of 'public interest.'

3. Structural Changes in Journalism Ethics

Following four aspects are related to the structural changes in journalistic ethics. Each phase has its own ethical implications. These four aspects of occupational change are interconnected and directly affect the ethical beliefs and behaviors of journalists.

Economic structure is changing. New business models are evolving which lead to the end of previous reliable business models. The collapse of previously reliable business models is the most pressing and distressing of the changes. Tactics to develop alternative revenue streams and to shore up old ones create new or newly intensified ethical pressure points (Singer, 2010, p.89). Editors today have turned their attention away from readers' interest in news and views to the promotion of their publishers' financial success. They are willingly squeezing news to enlarge the space they give to advertisements, which, after all, are what bring in the gravy. Traditional journalistic values are being firmly subordinated to market factors, not only in India, but the world over. Newspapers now care more about profits than about people. The saddest effect of the crunch on news or views is a tendency to make press coverage of them inadequate and shallow, to focus less on issues, more on personalities, to concentrate on today's sensations but neglect follow-up (D'Souza, 2000, p.1597).

Narrative structure is changing. As journalists have adapted to the Internet, their stories have taken on a more postmodern form. The construction of meaning is more fluid than in the past, and the process of that construction is more open and transparent (Singer, 2010, p.89). In the early 1960s, Tom Wolfe and other talented writers coined a term "New Journalism." It cleverly categorized the techniques of great fiction to news and feature writing. The New Journalism-that genre-blurred *mélange* of ethnography, investigative reportage, and fiction is widely and rightly considered to be the characteristic genre of the sixties. For a time, and certainly by mid-decade, it looked as if the surest means for a novelist to build a reputation-or rebuild it, as the case may be-

was to write a nonfiction report on a historical event, but write it as if it were a novel. Whether the subject was a cold-blooded serial killing (Truman Capote), the hippie counterculture (Joan Didion), or a march on the Pentagon (Norman Mailer), writers who had first written successful fictions found themselves turning to “the rising authority of nonfiction” to help make sense of the “fast-paced . . . apocalyptic” times they were living in. Likewise, a new generation of younger writers—for instance Wolfe, Michael Herr, Gail Sheehy, and Hunter S. Thompson—developed through the New Journalism a freedom of approach and range of style (along with an enormously receptive reading public) that even just several years earlier would probably not have been possible (Staub, 1997, p.54). The world of journalism is changing day by day. New technologies brought direct engagement with the readers. New formats and personal narrative style of writings have been encouraged to attract more subscribers. So, the traditional ethical guidelines for “making news” are being reconsidered (Singer, 2010, p.89).

Relationship structure is changing. The Relationships between journalists and audiences are also changing. In 2005, hundreds of common people covered stories about Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath based on their cell phones. These common citizens had no formal ties to media companies wrote stories, posted photographs and shared videos depicting Katrina’s devastation. These reports appeared in media ranging from CNN and MSNBC to local newspapers and Websites. Mainstream media began to embrace “participatory journalism” through the coverage of Katrina. The Dallas Morning News, Denver Post, Greenboro News & Record, Rocky Mountain News and other newspapers promoted citizen reporter Web pages. Readers and viewers were no longer content to remain passive news consumers. They used blogging and podcasting software, digital camera phones, and other technologies helped citizens to report news. Participatory journalism goes by many names. Some call it “citizen journalism,” other calls it “we media” or “grass-roots journalism.” December’s tsunami in South Asia highlighted participatory journalism’s ability to cover breaking news in places with few regular reporters. Tourists and residents with digital cameras and camera phones quickly transmitted images of the disaster, and witnessed used the Web to share their stories with the world. These reports from common citizens didn’t replaced professional reporting but added for better coverage. The crown jewel of participatory is South Korea’s OhmyNews.com. The on-line news organization, which boasts more than 700, 000 daily readers, has 54 staff reporters and editors, but at least 70 percent

of its content comes from 39,000 citizen reporters (Marshall, 2005, p.14). Due to advent of new technologies our old notion of journalist as gatekeeper is becoming obsolete. The Internet has torn down the fences. A journalist standing by the gate – opening it to allow this “fact” to pass through but closing it to other information that has not been verified – looks silly when, on either side of the gate, unfiltered, indiscriminate information is flooding through. Now, instead of being gatekeepers, journalists have transformed themselves as authenticators. With the flood of information, it is highly required for the journalists to differentiate between propaganda and truth (A new journalism for democracy in a new age, 2005, p. 52). Many U.S. media companies had launched Websites featuring participatory journalism. South Carolina’s Bluffton Today, take the best of its citizen reports and use them as print reports. Backfence.com practices “grass-root journalism” where readers not only submit their own stories but can edit stories posted by others. Many media researchers are worried about the growth of “participatory journalism” as many citizen journalism websites use unedited press releases, cute pet contests, and family vacation pictures. Critics are worried about the need for in-depth reporting in “citizen journalism” websites (Marshall, 2005, pp.14-15).

Organization structure is changing. Due to modern journalistic technologies newsrooms are being dramatically resized and reconfigured. So, the role of media persons and other working within the houses had been rethought. New responsibilities and working conditions generate ethical issues for journalists (Singer, 2010, p.89). MuncieFreePress which ran the site out of an apartment attracted more than 68,000 page views in its first month. According to Jonathan Weber, the founder and editor in chief of NewWest.net, Web provided advantage of allowing people to distribute news without needing to buy printing presses or build television studios. Thus funds are required to run a news organization (Marshall, 2005, p.15).

4. Journalism Ethics in the era of Modern Technology

We are living in the era of personal revelation. Modern technologies encouraged us to seek, gather and disclose information about others and ourselves. We are fond broadcasting what we know, think, do and feel; and we are motivated by business and pleasure because we care about friendship, kinship, health, wealth, education, politics, justice and culture. This era of revelation is dominated by portable electronics, internet social media, reality television, and traditional talk

radio – many of us are losing our privacy, our taste for privacy, and our willingness to respect privacy (Allen, 2012, p.1). In late 80s when Shabana Azmi sued Stardust for 25 lakhs for alleging her that she was having an affair with ex-boyfriend Shekhar Kapoor. Stardust refused to reveal the source to protect confidentiality of the source. But the beginning of 21st century showed new relationship between media and its source. New media technologies intruded into the private life of celebrities. Fun and popular social media like Facebook and Twitter made personal disclosures easy and irresistible. The Internet became a medium of exhibitionism and voyeurism (Allen, 2012, p.9).

WikiLeaks describes itself as “a non-profit media organization dedicated to bringing important news and information to the public.” It provides a “secure and anonymous way for independent sources around the world to leak information to its journalists.” WikiLeaks was provided with sensitive United States Government documents without any authority from 22 year old Private Bradley Manning, a then member of the United States armed forces on active duty. The information included field reports from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, classified State Department diplomatic cables, records concerning Guantanamo Bay detainees, and videos of United States military missions. In 2010, Manning was arrested and tried in 2011. He handed these sensitive documents to WikiLeaks to be published by them. Later, these were republished by major mainstream media and social media alike. Many people were appalled of such thing. But many others were not appalled as they failed to recognize any legitimate expectations of privacy, confidentiality or security or because they believed the social good of disclosure far outweighed any embarrassment of diplomats and nations (Allen, 2012, pp.3-4).

Journalism as a social institution that must remain completely independent of all other institutions so that it can serve the public as an objective observer of politics, business, religion, medicine, law, and education (Davis and Kent, 2013, p.72). But to stay in competition, journalism has adapted many reforms. Many research articles on journalistic ethics clearly indicated the lack of ethical standards and principles in contemporary journalism. Some writers have not hesitated to indict the entire newspaper business—or profession—on such charges as deliberate suppression of certain kinds of news, distortion of news actually published, studied unfairness toward certain classes, political organizations and social movements, systematic

catering to powerful groups of advertisers, brazen and vicious “faking,” and reckless disregard of decency, proportion and taste for the sake of increased profits. One of the gravest evils in American journalism is that which the more intelligent and serious newspaper writers themselves do not hesitate to characterize as “prostitution.” Sometimes it is shocked to hear correspondents, reporters, critics or commentators on the news candidly and brutally speak of themselves as intellectual prostitutes. Reporters color and distort the news; correspondents “editorialize” in their dispatches and give the managing editors just what they think, or what the publisher thinks, the readers ought to have (Yarros, 1922, p.410-414).

The men whose duty it is to interpret events and developments and to apply guiding principles to public questions express not their own ideas, but those of the proprietor. It is not infrequent that news policy is condemned or ridiculed by managing editor to bright office boy. In most cases, publisher dictates the policy of the paper and he never asks or cares what his employees who write and edit the paper think about the paper policy. They are all hired men and considered to be paid to take publisher’s orders and carry them properly. One of the roots of trouble in newspaper house is the fact that when publisher consider newspaper is supported not by its readers, but by its advertisers. “Circulation” is regarded as a means to an end – the procuring of profitable contracts with the big advertisers and the capture of a host of small advertisers (Yarros, 1922, p.412-415). According to J. B. D’Souza (2000, p.1597), the Times of 2nd May 2000, was priced Rs 2 for news and views. All scandals and gossips occupied 39% of the paper’s 24 pages. Advertisements got 50%, pictures were 5% and letter to editor occupied only 1% space. Statesman of same date gave 16 pages in Rs 1.50. news and views comprised of 60% of the total pages, 21% was advertisements, pictures covered 10% of the total space. Readers’ letters was only 1%. The content analysis by D’Souza showed editors today have turned their attention away from readers and mainly concentrated to promote publisher’s financial success.

5. Conclusion

The practice of journalism and media houses had gone through many radical changes due to advent of new and digital technologies. Internet and social media have been replaced by print-based news media. As media is changing audiences are changing too. So, does the Journalistic ethics. The media content is mainly controlled by the advertisers and audiences. Like any other

commodity, publishers sell news as commercial product in the package of sensationalism. Modern technologies have permitted the citizens talk back to the studios during live telecast. Radio-call in shows and on-line systems allow citizens to participant actively in news production. New technological and economic realities raised an important question about the future of ethical journalism. In a world where data, information and raw videos are widely available and where everyone with access to a computer and mobile can produce news, the value of professional journalism is in question.

References

- [1] A new journalism for democracy in a new age. *Nieman Report*, 59 (3), pp.50-52, 2005. Retrieved from Academic OneFile.
- [2] Allen, A. L. What must we hide: the ethics of privacy and the ethos of disclosure. *St. Thomas Law Review*, 25(1), p.1. (Fall, 2012). Retrieved from Academic OneFile
- [3] Bishop, W. H. The Role of Ethics in 21st Century Organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 118(3), pp. 635-637. Springer. (December, 2013). Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42921253>
- [4] Davis, D. K. and Kent, K. Journalism ethics in a global communication era: the framing journalism perspective. *China Media Research*, 9(2), p.72. (2013). Retrieved from Academic OneFile
- [5] D'Souza, J.B. Profit over People. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 35(19), pp. 1597-1598, (May 6-12, 2000).
- [6] Jadhav, R. M.K. Gandhi's Satyagrahi Model of Journalistic Ethics. *Language in India*, 12, pp.81-97, (December, 2012). ISSN: 1930 2940.
- [7] Kieran, M. *Media Ethics*, 1. London: Routledge. (January, 2002)
- [8] Marshall, J. Citizen journalism continues to surge: New technology blurring the lines between journalists and their audience. *The Quill*, pp.14-16, (October-November, 2005). Retrieved from *Academic OneFile*.
- [9] Singer, J.B. (Spring, 2010). Journalism ethics amid structural change. *Daedalus*, 139 (2), pp.89-99. The MIT Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749827>

- [10] Staub, M.E (Winter, 1997). Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties. *Representations*, 57, pp.52-72. University of California Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928663>
- [11] Tsui, L. Rethinking Journalism through Technology. In Zelizer, B. (Ed.), *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology and Truthiness*, p.54, (2009). Abingdon: Routledge.
- [12] Vanaik, A. Yellow Journalism and Journalists' Right to Non-Disclosure of Source. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22(42-43), pp.1789-1790, (October, 1987). Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377630>
- [13] Ward, S.J.A. *Global Journalism Ethics*. (March, 2010). Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- [14] Ward, S.J.A. Radical media ethics: responding to a revolution. *NORDICOM Review: Nordic Research on Media and Communication*, 35, pp.45-52. (2014). Retrieved from *Academic OneFile*
- [15] Yarros, V.S. Journalism, Ethics, and Common Sense. *International Journal of Ethics*, 32(4), pp. 410-419, (July, 1922). The University of Chicago Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2377555>