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Case Study - 26: Media ethics vs Public Safety

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You are a struggling reporter of a news channel and have been under severe pressure from your Editor-in-Chief to bring some sensational news to boost Television Rating Points (TRPs).

You have interviewed a famous religious leader of a minority faction on the recent Ayodhya verdict of Supreme Court. In the interview, the religious leader used a provocative statement and urged the members of the community to rebel against the court ruling. If the interview is aired, it might spark communal tensions and law and order problem in society. You are very well aware that if the interview is presented to the Editor-in-Chief, he will definitely air it to boost TRPs. The interview may lead to the exponential growth of your career.

In such circumstances, would it be right to present the interview to Editor-in-Chief?

(a) Identify the moral dilemma faced by you.

(b) Analyse your role and duties as a responsible reporter, also suggest your course of action.

Solution

The given case highlights the responsibilities of media persons in upholding the societal ethics. Media ethics involves promoting and defending values such as a universal respect for life and the rule of law and legality.

Facts of the Case

**Stakeholders
Involved**

Ethical Values

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- Struggling reporter under pressure to boost the TRPs of the new channel.
 - Religious leader gave provocative statements in an interview.
 - Fear of communal conflict if interview aired.
 - Editor-in-Chief would want to air it if presented to him.
 - Editor-in-chief
 - Self (struggling reporter)
 - Minority religious leader
 - Society
 - Professionalism
 - Honesty and fairness
 - Objectivity
 - Impartiality
 - Tolerance
 - Fraternity

Moral Dilemmas Faced

- **Freedom of Speech v/s Public Safety:** Religious leader has the freedom to express his opinion on the issue but at the same time there is also a threat to public safety due to his opinion.
- **Organizational Goals v/s Personal Ethics:** Airing sensational news would be beneficial to boost the TRPs of the news channel. However, personal ethics may restrict one to do so.

Roles and Duties as a Reporter

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.

A responsible reporter should be aware that his/her news stories **shape people's opinion on contentious issues**. So he/she should adhere to the following principles of journalism:

- **Truth and Accuracy:** Getting the facts right is the cardinal principle of journalism.
- **Independence:** Journalists should be independent voices; they should not act, formally or informally, on behalf of special interests whether political, corporate or cultural.
- **Humanity:** Journalists shouldn't harm the society at any cost. What they publish or broadcast may be hurtful, but one must be aware of the impact of the words and images on the lives of others.
- **Accountability:** A reporter should be accountable to the impact of their reports on the society at large.

Also, the Press Council of India mentions that it is the duty of the press **not to discriminate or to inflame hatred** on such grounds as race, nationality, religion, or gender. The press should refrain from mentioning the race, religion or nationality of the

subject of news stories unless relevant to the story. Also, the news coverage should **promote tolerance** in the society.

Course of Action:

- **Critically analyzing the interview:** As a reporter, one should thoroughly analyze whether the statements made were mere expression of dissent or a form of hate speech to cause public disharmony. It is also the duty of the reporter not to deprive minorities with the viewpoints of their leaders if done in an ethical manner.
- **Analyzing the possibility of a re-interview:** The religious leader should be made to realize the possible outcomes of his statements. Since, it is a recorded interview, he should be given a chance to reframe his sentences in public interest.
- **Not presenting the interview to the Editor-in-chief:** Still, if the statements are provocative, it should not be shown to the Editor-in-Chief in the larger interest of social harmony and law and order.

Conclusion

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.

In the words of Gandhiji, *“The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power; but just as unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy.”* Hence, media should play its role in a responsible manner.