



# Ethics in Journalism

## Gandhian Ethics on Journalism

"The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy."- Mahatma Gandhi.

- **Idea of Social Responsibility:** While recognising that the newspaper is a great power", Mahatma Gandhi- himself a great journalist and editor, was very clear about the objectives of journalism and why it shouldn't be an unchained torrent of water.
  - He wasn't referring to external curbs or control on free speech and freedom of the press - both of which he always supported and fought for. Instead, he was articulating the idea of social responsibility of journalism.
  - This simply put, means that journalism must be socially responsible, serve the people with devotion, and educate them while **avoiding sensationalism, distortion and manipulation of facts** in the news reports, and not compromise with ethical standards of journalism for profit.

## Importance of Journalism

- **Voice of voiceless:** As the fourth estate of democracy and voice of voiceless'. The news media and the institution of journalism plays a crucial role for keeping the citizens informed about powerful instruments of public information, opinion and debates.
- **Public watchdog:** One cannot imagine a vibrant democracy without a vibrant, independent and critical news media which not only disseminates news and views of public importance but also acts as a watchdog that monitors, investigates and critically examines the functioning of key organs and institutions of the State, and evaluates the performances of those in the public office and holds the accountable.
- **Enhances vibrance of democracy:** An independent news media which includes legacy media like newspapers, magazines, television radio and new media like online news portals and digital news platforms, has been integral to democracy's long and tumultuous journey.
  - Over time, it has evolved with democracy, especially in the late 19 and 20' century. There and vibrant media is treated as a key parameter for the success of a democracy and in fact, is among the crucial factors in measuring its health.
- **Shaping the public perception:** It has an influential role in shaping public perception, setting the agenda for public debate and its widespread impact on the society, politics, economy, culture and governance, news media and journalism enjoys a powerful position in a democratic society.
  - Thus, Napoleon Bonaparte had once famously said, "Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."

## Features of Responsible Journalism

- **Transparency and accountability:** The credibility and respect doesn't come free or as a gift to the news media but eamed and sustained by adhering to the ethical and moral standards of

journalism. News media must also follow the principles and norms of journalism and be transparent and accountable for its reportage, commentary and overall functioning.

- **Maintaining journalistic ethics:** Like other public-facing professions, journalism too has also evolved with a set of ethical principles, standards and norms for fulfilling its social responsibility and serving the citizens better by ensuring the quality of content and highest professional standards in gathering, processing, filtering and dissemination of news and views.
  - **Journalistic ethics** are basically a set of principles, standards, guidelines and code of conduct prepared for professional journalists. It deals with conduct, character and behavior of a journalist and how she works before, during and after the news gathering and dissemination process.
- **Self regulation:** Generally, it is expected from the news media outlets and its professional journalists to not only strictly follow these principles and norms but to also self-regulate in alignment with them.
  - But given the non-mandatory and voluntary nature of journalistic ethics, there are always complaints of violation by journalists and news media outlets.
  - There is no denying the fact that a section of news media outlets are either willingly or unwillingly deviating from or compromising on journalistic ethics to attract more readers or viewers, for some personal gains and generally, at the altar of commercial interests and to boost their bottom-lines.

## Issues with Journalism in India

- **Erosion of ethics in journalism:** In India instances of violation of ethical norms and principles; from indulging in Paid News, spreading Fake News, engaging sensationalism and exaggerating trivial stories, creating misleading headlines, breach of privacy, distortion of facts has increased manifold.
- **Biased reporting:** Openly taking sides and bias in reporting. Besides this, many mainstream news media outlets and their journalists are found to be engaging in one-sided media trials, lobbying for personal gains, blackmailing, manipulating news stories, engaging in malicious and defamatory reporting, running propaganda and disinformation campaigns.
- **Misuse of freedom of speech and press:** There is a growing concern in the country that many Indian news media outlets have shown little respect for journalistic ethics and norms by regularly crossing the limits and becoming habitual offenders.
  - In fact, the critics of unethical conduct of the news media are demanding stringent regulation in place of ineffective self regulatory mechanism and their voices are growing louder day by day.
  - It may be noted that like many other liberal democracies, India too recognises the primacy of the Freedom of the Press and allows for self regulation of news media
- **Manipulation of TRPs:** Recently, various claims have been made about the manipulation of **TRPs (Target Rating Points)** by some TV channels by rigging the devices used by the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India.
  - TRP is the metric used by the marketing and advertising agencies to evaluate viewership. It represents how many people, from which socio-economic categories, watched which channels for how much time during a particular period. This period is one minute as per the international standards.

## Reforms Initiated in U.S.A

- **Pollution of democratic discourse:** Earlier due to **yellow journalism**, newspapers in the USA were riddled with sensational crime stories with exaggerated headlines, pictures and sketches. There was cut throat competition and a mad rush to attract more readers and maximising the profits for newspapers' owners. But this was also polluting the democratic discourse, distorting the public opinion, impairing the citizens' right and negatively affecting their democratic choices and decisions.
- **Campaign for reforms:** Slowly a concerted campaign started in the US and many other countries

in the early 20th century to bring in ethics and principles with a set of guidelines and code of conduct for news media and journalists.

- **Canons of journalism:** In the US, in 1922, **the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE)** adopted a set of ethical principles titled 'Canons of Journalism', which was later revised and renamed 'Statement of Principles' in 1975.
- **Key principles:** The ASNE proposed **six key principles;** Responsibility, Freedom of the Press, Independence, Truth and Accuracy, Impartiality and Fair Play.

- These principles were devised to professionalise the news media and journalism and to set it to ethical standards to monitor and evaluate the journalistic work and its contents.

- **Hutchins Commission:** This Commission was established to review the functioning of the press and the impact of media ownership on its content. The Commission reiterated that while the freedom of press is paramount, it also has a moral obligation to consider the well-being of the general public when making its decisions and choices.

- It provided a strong philosophical basis for adopting these ethical norms and standards for improving the quality of news media and journalism. The report echoed Gandhi's concerns of "**an uncontrollable pen**" while stressing that its "**sole aim should be service**":

- **Yellow journalism:** It is a style of newspaper reporting that emphasizes sensationalism over facts.

- In this the use of lurid features and sensationalized news in newspaper publishing to attract readers and increase circulation.
- The phrase was coined in the 1890s to describe the tactics employed in the furious competition between two New York City newspapers, the World and the Journal.

## Acts and Agencies

- **The Press Council of India (PCI):** A **statutory and quasi-judicial body**, was established by an Act of Parliament. It functions as a "watchdog of the press, for the press and by the press".
  - Its two broad objectives are-safeguarding the freedom of the press and to improve its quality and standards.
  - It works on the premise of self regulation of print media but has **no punitive powers**.
  - It can only censure, warn or ask newspapers to issue apologies and corrections.
  - It has also put out a detailed "**Norms of Journalistic Conduct**" which it expects journalists and newspapers to follow with utmost care and diligence.
- **News Broadcasting Standard Authority (NBSA):** It is a **non-governmental body**, it oversees the news channels. It has issued a "**Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards**" for its member news channels who had voluntarily pledged to follow it.
  - Like the PCI, the NBSA too is **headed by a retired Supreme Court judge** and its other members comprise well-known people belonging to civil society and editors of TV news channels.
  - It receives complaints of violation of technical norms against member TV news channels and decides after hearing all the sides. Additionally, it has the power of imposing a fine that can go up to Rs. one lakh against an errant channel.
- **Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995:** Apart from the NBSA, the news channels are also regulated by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) under the **Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995** which contains a "programme code" and an "advertising code" to which news channels have to adhere.
  - Their adherence to this code is, in fact, one of the pre-conditions for obtaining the license

for a news channel. The I&B Ministry, on some rare occasions, for violation of "programme code has taken strict action against errant channels while on others has issued advisories to the news channels.

## Issues with the Existing Architecture of Regulation

- **Ineffective in reforming unethical conducts:** The real question facing is how effective is the present architecture of news media regulation in India considering the growing instances of violation of ethical principles and norms by the news media and journalists.
- **Lack of introspection:** Apart from jurists, intellectuals and civil society members, many senior journalists and editors themselves are not happy with the present state of journalistic ethics in India.
  - They are calling for serious introspection from news media outlets and the journalists' community to take steps to minimise the flouting of ethical norms, and to take corrective measures and honest initiatives to improve the quality and standards of the news media in India.
  - News media outlets have to understand that it's in their own interest to follow ethical norms to sustain public faith in them.

## Way Forward

- **Initiating discussions on reforms:** Professional bodies like the Editors Guild of India, NBA and statutory bodies like PCI can take lead and initiate debate and discussion on this issue and propose remedial measures.
  - Everyone knows the cost of failure would be very high as witnessed in the News of the World scandal in the UK. In India too, a chorus demanding harsher regulation is gaining momentum.
- **Imposing reasonable restrictions on the media:** While demanding punitive power for the Press Council of India, it is articulated that there is no freedom which is absolute. All freedoms are subject to reasonable restrictions, and are also coupled with responsibilities.
  - In a democracy everyone is accountable to the people, and so is the media. Therefore Indian media must now introspect and develop a sense of responsibility and maturity. One hopes that the Indian news media will remember the advice and warning of Mahatma Gandhi.
- **Strict adherence to ethical norms:** It is also important that the saner voices within the media fraternity will see the warning signs and act fast to restore the credibility of the news media and journalism as a profession by ensuring adherence to ethical norms, try to win citizens' confidence and work to strengthen the social contract with the public.