
UNIT 2 NEWS MEDIA AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

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2.0 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit of this block, you were acquainted with the concept of the term 'ethics' and it was explained why it is vital for all of us to adhere to ethics. In this unit, we shall take the discussion forward and deal with some ethical concerns that our nation's mass media in general, and the news media in particular, should be essentially sensitive to. There are numerous deep-seated ethical concerns in the news media contents that are being thrown up day in and day out. This unit will provide you with some professional inputs and guidelines about news media's role in reflecting these values and our national aspirations.

2.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- define ethical concerns;
- discuss the reasons of these ethical concerns;
- outline steps to address these ethical concerns; and
- develop ethics in your professional career.

2.2 WHAT ARE NEWS MEDIA'S ETHICAL CONCERNS?

In the previous unit, ethics were defined as "that branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct with respect to rightness and wrongness

of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such action.” By dictionary definitions both ethics and morality are concerned with conduct that is right or wrong according to accepted standards or principles.

Now, let us understand the meaning of ‘ethical concerns’ in news media’s operations. According to the 1996 edition of the Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary the word ‘ethical’ means: “pertaining to, or dealing with morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in conduct; secondly, being in accordance with rules or standards for right conduct or practice, particularly the standards of a profession that should be: good moral, upright, honest, righteous, virtuous.”

According to Roget’s 21st Century Thesaurus in dictionary form, 1999 the word ‘ethical’ stands for being “clean, conscientious, correct, decent, elevated, equitable, fair, good, high-principled, honest, honourable, humane, just, kosher, moralistic, noble, straight, respectable, right, right-minded, square, true blue, upright, upstanding, virtuous.”

The online dictionary.com states the meaning of ‘ethical’ as: “pertaining to or dealing with morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in conduct; or, according to standards for right conduct or practice, especially the profession.”

Now let us look at the word ‘concern,’ according to Webster’s it means: “to relate to; be connected with; be of interest or importance to; to affect; to interest or engage; anything that relates or pertains to a person; business; affair; matter that engages a person’s attention, interest, or care or that affects a person’s welfare or happiness; important matter having bearing on.”

Therefore, if we put these two words together, ‘ethical concerns’ would mean anything that calls into question the ethics of a person or organisation. However, it also needs to be stated that the concept of right or wrong varies with time, place and situation. They evolve over a period of time and cannot be applied uniformly as they are relative concepts. Behaviour that is considered unethical by one society or a generation may be quite acceptable to another. Nonetheless, ethical conduct remains of significance to the society.

Any event or story that is not completely truthful or has been obtained through wrongful means or not ‘according to standards for right conduct’ of media is of ethical concern. If any news medium focuses negatively or adversely on a specific aspect of a news story, without any valid, verifiable, or justified reason on a person, an organisation/institution, business firm, to deliberately hurt their image; that would be deemed unethical.

Thus, as a media professional you should make correct choices in your conduct and decision-making in day-to-day practice, so that you can discharge your duties without fear or favour, and with a clear conscience.

2.3 CAUSES OF ETHICAL CONCERNS

In recent times, the delivery of news has become almost instantaneous - thanks to the worldwide web, 24x7 global internet services, smartphones, texting, etc. In

order to meet the audiences' needs, expectations and demands for news, and still more news, reporters and news correspondents are constantly expected to meet the taxing standards and requirements that are set by news media organisations. To effectuate the rising scales and standards of speed, accuracy and fairness, the news media are quite frequently faced with several tough situations and requirements. Moreover, to make sure that what the news media present to the audience is objective, truthful, verifiable, just, impartial, most important, and latest to the fraction of a second; is extremely challenging during normal circumstances for anybody. These could be even more stern and critical in emergent circumstances.

The reporters have to rise to the demands of any occasion and race against time to meet the unearthly deadlines and cope with limited feedback from news sources. For example, an untimely fire or murder mishap will invariably put the news media persons on their toes. Besides, with a view to making a report accurate and comprehensive to the last detail, collecting and packing all the facts, writing the piece as objectively as possible and, turning it in time for publication or broadcast turns out to be very often an exacting challenge and, these have to be met by media news reporters daily to meet audiences' expectations from them.

While the news media always stretch every nerve to be up-to-date, truthful and objective in reporting a news event; but extraordinary haste, jet speed-developing events, shortage of time, and lack of fuller details may make the story wanting in many ways, such as a detailed description of circumstances leading to the occurrence of the event, etc.

Given the arduous environment in which the news persons perform their task, though difficult, certain vital points can get left out due to heavy scramble for resources, late news-fall, and shortage of newspaper space or lack of radio or television time. To handle such tight rope situations, many times reporters make do with whatever information is easily available or accessible to transmit their dispatches in time. Obviously, mistakes do take place; inaccuracies are bound to creep in, most often unintentionally, and sometimes, even deliberately. Racing against the clock, or due to lack of resources at their disposal, a reporter may not visit the news spot, which can create visible (objectionable) loopholes in the story and may lead to people's distrust of the news media's adequate care for the audiences' ethical concerns or the core values of the media outlet's intentions and integrity.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) What does the term 'ethical' mean?

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2) How has 24 hour media affected the standards of news?

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2.4 UNIVERSAL ETHICAL CONCERNS

News media establishments have globally accepted ethical principles and standards. Stephen Ward of the University of Wisconsin, Center for Media Ethics opines, “global media ethics aims at developing a comprehensive set of principles and standards for practice of journalism in an age of global news media”. He states that since “news reports via satellite or internet reach people around the world, and influence the actions of governments, militaries humanitarian agencies and warring ethnic groups, a responsible media ethics is needed in a world where news media bring together a plurality of different religions, traditions and ethnic groups.”

Prof. Ward further argues that global journalism ethics can be seen as an extension of journalism ethics - to regard journalism’s ‘public’ as the citizens of the world, and to interpret the ethical principles of objectivity, balance, and independence in an international manner. Journalism ethics become more ‘cosmopolitan’ in tone and perspective. According to him, the components for global media ethics should be: “1) global re-interpretation of the ethical role and aims of journalism; 2) global re-interpretation of existing journalism principles and standards – objectivity, balance and independence; 3) construction of new norms and ‘best practice’ as guides for the practice of global journalism”.

In addition, it should be remembered that today’s news media persons will gain greater insights in the audiences’ extending ethical concerns by pursuing the following new leads of the profession: by conducting research studies in news media’s new innovation in reporting new and emerging global regions, studying the impact of globalisation of news media — ownership, technology, practice; coverage of global issues; their local and international approaches to news reporting, news analysis, photojournalism, etc. To adequately perceive such issues at length, it would be immensely profitable to access some of the internationally recognised news media organisations’ news outlets; such as The Wall Street Journal, The Times, London, Fox television network; The New York Times and its affiliates, The International Herald Tribune; to name a few.

News media persons should also try to emulate global reporting practices and standards; redefine coverage of international events; watch globally accepted journalists’ code of ethics; global initiative to defend and enhance free and responsible news media. It is considered imperative that global media ethics should act as global agent; serve the citizens of the world; and promote non-parochial understandings.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) What are global journalism ethics?

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2) How can news media professionals address the ethical concerns of global audiences?

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2.5 ETHICAL ISSUES

As discussed earlier, news media is faced with various kinds of ethical concerns which may vary in terms of time, place, person and organisation. However, some major issues afflicting news media are discussed in this section.

2.5.1 Conflict of Interests

Conflict of interest occurs when a media person's obligations or interests clash with his/her duty as a journalist. This practice can take on many forms, let us look at some of them.

Many media organisations in India have stakes in other business interests and this interferes with their ability to report objectively on topics that could be detrimental to the said businesses. In such cases, media owners try to tell the stories in a manner that is beneficial to them. They would not want to report and can forbid their editors to report on any issue which could harm their business or affect them adversely. For example, a conflict or clash of interest could crop up while reporting a political story negatively whence the news media owner may be positively inclined to the issue reported. A case in point is that of a large Kolkata business house's interest in a newspaper. The owners of a newspaper simultaneously had huge interest in rayon and jute manufacturing businesses in Kerala and West Bengal, respectively. In such situations, particular news media outlets that are owned by these industries, support and propagate the interests of

their enterprises by extensive reporting of government policies concerning these industries.

It is a reality of the day that almost all news media organisations survive on the strength of advertising revenue. There are several advertisers – multi-national corporations and domestic – who dole out heavy and regular ads to the popular news media outlets to seek their editorial support and favourable comment about their business interests.

In certain cases, news media outlets have fixated bias against certain parties / leaders / ideologies due to reasons of their own. The viewpoints purveyed and supported by different channels such as NDTV network, The Times Television, Zee network, Doordarshan, or Eenadu television would obviously be poles apart. The reporters of the respective news media would give a core view, but the crux of the story may be tilted to suit the particular news media's political policy directions.

If a newspaper owner or editor happens to be a nominated legislative member of a party, it would be natural for that media outlet to favour that party, or support its ideology. In such cases, the reporting tilts in their or their party's favour, which is bound to be apparent in their newspapers' editorial policies and routine reporting. A reporter of the news media outlet may earn the wrath of his employer or editor doing a news story that may conflict with the political, religious, economic, and business interest of the media outlet's owner.

There could also be some occasions when a reporter's personal views may conflict with the politician or the party that s/he is reporting on. Also, the views of the editor / proprietor could be in conflict with the politician or the party. It is quite common that some reporters/ correspondents are innately committed to certain political ideologies or political groups, and these are reflected in their stories.

In such circumstances, an independent-minded reporter while writing the news story 'objectively' could hurt his/her own or the political interests of the organisation, or could dilute the spirit of the event or issue s/he may be reflecting on. Thus, conflict of interest constitutes a serious issue plaguing news media today.

2.5.2 Bias and Subjectivity

News reports are often reported in a particular style, angle, bias in a manner that has led to the suspicion of the news media's intentions and objects. Apart from the bias due to conflict of interest discussed above, reporters quite often get personally involved in doing their stories about certain noted politicians against whom cases of alleged corruption, murder, disproportionate assets, etc., are in courts. Similarly, there are several criminal-politicians, seasoned criminals, and gangsters about whom media persons get to know intimately, and gauge their interests in various national and international scandals. Such personal knowledge gathered when court hearings are in progress leads them to become biased against them. Media persons who cover and see them in court on a regular basis are able to see through their scandalous careers based on the court proceedings. Hence, their reports are likely to get coloured with their personal knowledge of such people's dishonest deeds leading to bias and subjectivity in reporting.

2.5.3 News Source Confidentiality

With a view to writing in-depth stories, and analysis, or doing investigative reporting, journalists quite frequently report based on information from confidential sources and sensitive documents. Centered on materials so procured or offered, reporters rush through exclusive articles that create a lot of commotion, public furor and even at times political storm. There have been innumerable cases where reporters have published articles using confidential sources and quoting from secret papers and official government documents that have overthrown regimes, ousted governments, put many chief ministers and VIPs behind bars. Often, serious ethical concerns have been expressed where reporters covered special stories, based on information concerning an individual's personal conduct in private life.

2.5.4 Sting Operations

Deep and all-pervasive ethical concerns have also been involved in issues relating to sting operations, also known as under cover reporting. For example, former BJP president Bangaru Laxman was shown accepting Rs.1 lakh for promising political favours in Tehelka's sting operation. In yet another identical case, a sting operation on a Delhi government girls' school teacher was alleged to be involved in a prostitution racket. The sting operation proved to be a fraudulent act; the sting operator was later held and criminal proceedings initiated against him. In the entire process an innocent woman was dragged in a false allegation and the reporter's fraudulent reporting was widely condemned. Due to the news media reporter's penchant for scoops and exclusive stories using sting operations, they get into innumerable traps. While some do triumph with glory, and win awards; there are several others who err and get dropped by the wayside and become victims of many unethical allures for the sake of outpacing and beating their rivals, contemporaries and competitors.

2.5.5 Paid News

According to the Press Council of India (PCI) paid news is 'any news or analysis appearing in print or electronic media for consideration in cash or kind'. The trend of paid news is on the rise in India, and several print and broadcast media organisations publish favourable news stories in exchange for money. These news stories could be sponsored by organisations, celebrities, high end businessmen, political parties and politicians. A few years ago the PCI asked government to stop giving advertisements to the newspapers found guilty of paid news.

2.5.6 Intrusion into Privacy

One of the cardinal principles of news reporting is that news should be treated as a serious business and not considered as entertainment. However, some news media outlets, particularly television channels, often put out news events in a trivially light-hearted style creating derisive impression about the mass media as an institution. Some news media persons in their hunger for exclusive stories about the high and mighty, VIPs, or celebrities, tend to intrude into or peep into the individuals' totally personal, private and intimate affairs, creating privacy issues for news media outlets as also for themselves. Such stories hurt audiences' sensitivities and raise questions about their ethical concerns. News media persons should avoid such ventures lest they are caught on the wrong foot. In fact, some Indian language television news channels have been warned by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting to shun such practices.

2.5.7 PR Press Releases Masquerading as News

It is a well-known fact that several news media persons end up as public relations personnel or corporate communication specialists due to heavy remunerations offered by many noted multinational companies and corporate firms. These PR persons are often friendly with news media persons and tend to push the press notes and press releases of their companies masquerading as news stories. Such stories are very easily discernible and can hurt the ethical views of news media's overall conduct and general public's sensibilities.

Some other ethical concerns pertain to plagiarism, sensationalism, and offensive reporting. Plagiarism of news items from other sources degrades the media's prestige and lowers the reporter's position in the profession. And, when the media audiences discover such tendencies in a particular mass medium's practices, they start losing faith and trust in its credibility and integrity in its overall news operations. They may occasionally present certain exclusive stories in a manner that's deemed outrageous and outright offensive. Sensational reports on rapes, kidnapping, molestation, murders, and many other crimes relating to women not only are in bad taste, but also demeaning for women.

It has been noticed of late that innumerable popular culture themes from western media, though not completely compatible to our ancient heritage and culture are being put out on television channels, and disseminated even through print media. Majority of weekend magazine sections of most mass-circulated daily newspapers in English and other Indian languages, and weekly glossies are reproducing cheap titillating stuff from foreign journals. In addition, images or graphic description of wars, sex, violence, mutilation of bodies, also constitute ethical concerns. Graphic and gory images do not always carry the real story, in fact it has been proved that exposure to such images can desensitise people towards the gravity of the story. Apart from this, reporters should also be careful about the use of inappropriate language, deliberate manipulation of news or giving a slant to a story, which also constitute unethical practices.

2.6 HOW TO ADDRESS ETHICAL CONCERNS

Many mass media establishments and organisations have drawn up their own codes for their journalists. One such prominent organisation is The Society of Professional Journalists of the USA. The SPJ is "dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior." In India journalists' organisations like the Indian Federation of Working Journalists and National Union of Journalists (India) have their codes for journalists. Similarly in Britain National Union of Journalists has its code but the real challenge is that how much these codes are effective in practice. Most of these codes include:

Ethical journalism should be objective, accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Ethical journalism should treat sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of dignity and respect. The highest and primary obligation of journalism is to serve the public.

A code of ethics specifies the following guidelines to journalists:

- Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.

- Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional.
- Support open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Recognise a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information.

If you see a news organisation that seems to regularly ignore these guidelines, question it.

News media reporters are expected to be accurate, truthful, objective, and balanced in writing their stories. However, it needs to be stressed here that 'truth is not a matter of reporting what has happened, but an accurate reproduction of what someone has told you that has happened, as s/he saw it happening with his/her own eyes.' This version of the truth fits more comfortably with the working practices of journalists.

Objectivity is an essential technique for removing bias in seeking truth. Objectivity, while not absolutely achievable, can be partially achieved by the journalist if s/he sets aside personal and social conditioning that would colour the story differently. Journalists also have the responsibility to not produce information or to see their information is not used to mislead the public. In addition, they need to provide balance in news reporting which involves providing equal space and time to all parties involved, while writing or describing a news occurrence. Be it the ruling party, or the opposition, political leaders, and their views, it would only be prudent to allocate them equal broadcast time or newspaper space.

Self-regulation is a nebulous concept which has been defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as "the act or action of refraining from expressing something (such as a thought, point of view, or belief) that others could deem objectionable". Self-regulation is done by media organisations/journalists/reporters at their own discretion for various reasons - there may be adverse consequences if they tell the truth, deference to the sensibilities of the public or any other. For example, reporters covering the war live are expected to self censor their stories; for doing otherwise might not be in national interest and due to the commitment to a cause or simply because of personal loyalty to the soldiers, or for the fear of endangering life by giving away vital army information that may prove detrimental for the country. You will read more about self-regulation in Unit 3 of this block.

There is also a stringent need to avoid yellow journalism and sensational stories. It is often said, 'yellow journalism thrills, but it ultimately kills' - both the author of the story and media outlet disseminating it. Such reporting has abhorrent sociological impact on younger generation of our times.

It is vital to draw the attention of media owners, media professionals, media consumers and the powers that be, toward these emerging maladies which are likely to dilute our inherent values, social mores, and our rich and ancient culture. The need of the hour for reporters is to be aware of the sensitivities of their audiences - their likes and dislikes, preferences, and social milieu to address their

information needs. The golden rule for any mass medium to win new audience, retain the old ones and climb new height in the business is to be as objective, truthful, balanced, fair and transparent as possible. These may seem rather difficult to achieve in the present media environment, but need to be adhered for creating a healthy, informed and congenial society.

Activity-1

Check the ‘Norms of Journalistic Conduct’ outlined by the Press Council of India on the link: <http://presscouncil.nic.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/NORMS.pdf>

Check Your Progress: 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) How do business pressures affect news media’s ethics?

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2) What kind of concerns does yellow journalism raise for news media?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we discussed some ethical concerns and how to deal with them, with the help of examples. We identified some areas of concern in present media environment such as conflict of interests, bias and subjectivity in reporting, paid news, news-source confidentiality, sting operations, intrusion into privacy and press releases masquerading as news; etc. which need to be checked. We also outlined some dos and don’ts for media persons who are expected to be accurate, objective, balanced, impartial, sensitive, responsible, and trustworthy in their reporting.

As news media operations are rapidly becoming technology-based, time-bound, financially-restrained and politically-constrained; the task of reporters gets highly complicated. Reporting news is a responsible job that should be undertaken with

due care and caution. A news story that hurts the intrinsic values, cultural moorings and cherished ideals of a society will be abhorred by audiences. It is bounden duty of news media persons to follow basic ethical norms and report news in a manner that does not call into question their integrity as a journalist.

2.8 FURTHER READINGS

Media Ethics by Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2012.

Communication Ethics and Universal Values by Christians, C.G., and M. Traber, Sage Publications, New York, 1997.

Ethical Issues in Journalism and the Media, eds. Andrew Belsey and Ruth Chandwick, Routledge, London, 1992.

Mass Communication Law and Ethics by Roy L. Moore, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey, 1994.

Handbook of Mass Media Ethics, eds. Lee Wilkins and Clifford G. Christians, Routledge, 2009.

2.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

- 1) The term 'ethical' implies making correct choices in our behaviour, conduct, and decision making so that we can discharge our duties with a clear conscience, and without fear or favour.
- 2) Twenty four hour new media have led to increased audience expectations which in turn have put undue pressures on media persons. News houses are required to bring news promptly to the audience, which affects the standards of speed, accuracy and fairness, of the news stories. In the race for breaking news, scoops and exclusives, reporters lose sight of their goals and use information which may not be from reliable sources and thus not verifiable.

Check Your Progress: 2

- 1) Global journalism ethics are universal in nature, following the principles of objectivity, balance, and independence. Global media ethics act as global agent; serve the citizens of the world; and promote non-parochial understandings.
- 2) News media professionals should strive to conduct research to gain insights into new innovations in reporting. They should study the changes brought about by globalisation, coverage of global issues, and follow globally accepted code of ethics and norms.

Check Your Progress: 3

- 1) The revenue generated by advertisements is the mainstay of any news organisation. In turn, the advertisers expect the news houses to print/

broadcast favourable news about them, which puts undue pressure on reporters and media houses and prevents them from reporting objectively. When large organisations or people have stakes in media houses, it can lead to biased news reports.

- 2) Yellow journalism is the practice of sensationalising news in order to increase circulation and TRPs. Emanating from non-reliable sources, many a times these reports are in bad taste and lead to a loss of reputation of the reporters as well as the media organisation indulging in it.

