

MEDIA ETHICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: RESPONSIBILITY, RIGHTS, AND REGULATION

1. Introduction to Media Ethics:

- 1) **Meaning:** Media ethics is the study of values, duties, and responsibilities guiding media in informing society truthfully, fairly, and respectfully.
- 2) **Origin:** Derived from Ethos (Greek word meaning “character” or “habit”).
- 3) **Why Media Ethics Matters:** Media shapes public opinion, influences democracy, and affects reputations. Ethics ensures that this power is not misused.
- 4) **Difference between Ethics, Law, and Morality:**
 1. **Ethics** = professional values (truth, fairness).
 2. **Law** = government rules (e.g., PEMRA Ordinance, PECA 2016).
 3. **Morality** = personal or cultural values (e.g., respecting community sensitivities).

Example (Pakistan): During 2022 floods, ethical journalism highlighted suffering of flood victims in Sindh, mobilising donations globally. In contrast, some outlets sensationalised tragedies for higher ratings – showing why ethics matters.

2. Importance of Media Ethics:

- 1) **Preserves Public Trust:** Without ethics, audiences stop believing in news.
- 2) **Protects the Vulnerable:** Ethical reporting shields children, victims, minorities.
- 3) **Balances Freedom with Responsibility:** Free media without restraint can spread hate or falsehood.
- 4) **Supports Democracy:** Ethical media enables informed decisions by citizens.

- 5) **Maintains Professional Credibility:** Journalists are respected only when their work is reliable and fair.

Example (Pakistan): During elections, ethical reporting provides fair coverage to all political parties, while unethical reporting may unfairly favour one group, leading to distrust.

3. Key Characteristics of Ethical Media:

- 1) **Public-Interest Focused:** Media serves citizens, not just advertisers or politicians.

Example: Reporting on water shortage in Karachi highlights citizens' needs over political speeches.

- 2) **Universality & Cultural Relevance:** Ethics apply globally but must respect local culture.

Example: Coverage of religious events in Pakistan must remain respectful to all faiths.

- 3) **Accountability:** Journalists must accept responsibility for errors.

Example: Dawn newspaper publishes corrections when mistakes are identified.

- 4) **Independence:** Resist pressure from political or business interests.

Example: Media houses refusing "paid news" during election campaigns.

- 5) **Transparency:** Corrections, sponsorships, and conflicts of interest should be disclosed.

Example: Geo TV declaring when a program is sponsored by a corporate brand.

- 6) **Balance of Science & Humanity (Technology + Compassion):** Media must adapt to digital tools but not lose the human touch.

Example: A digital news site in Karachi uses AI for fact-checking but still ensures stories are written with empathy for victims.

- 7) **Dynamic Nature:** Ethical codes evolve with new platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and AI-generated news.

Example: A Pakistani influencer misusing deepfake videos was criticised for violating ethical and social norms.

4. Fundamental Ethical Principles in Media:

- 1) **Accuracy & Verification** – Always verify facts before publishing.

Example: During COVID-19, unverified WhatsApp messages spread panic about hospitals running out of oxygen. Ethical media corrected the misinformation.

- 2) **Impartiality & Fairness** – Present multiple sides, avoid one-sided coverage.

Example: Giving voice to both employers and workers during Karachi industrial strikes.

- 3) **Minimising Harm** – Protect victims' dignity, avoid graphic or sensational content.

Example: Not showing close-up images of blast victims in Quetta or Karachi.

- 4) **Respect for Privacy** – Avoid unnecessary intrusion into private lives.

Example: Media must not expose the identity of rape victims, as per law and ethics.

- 5) **Independence from Conflicts of Interest** – No hidden sponsorships or political bias.

Example: Journalists refusing “envelopes” (bribes) to alter reporting.

- 6) **Accountability & Corrections** – Admit mistakes openly.

Example: Online portals posting corrections after misreporting about a government policy.

5. Branches of Media Ethics & Pakistan-Relevant Examples

1) Print Media (Newspapers, Magazines):

1. Ethics: Verification, avoid libel/defamation, clear distinction between opinion and fact.
2. Example: Urdu dailies criticised for publishing sensational headlines without confirmation, leading to misinformation.

2) Broadcast Media (TV, Radio):

1. Ethics: Responsible live coverage, no sensational visuals, respect cultural sensitivities.
2. Example: PEMRA fines channels for showing insensitive coverage of terrorist attacks.

3) Digital News Platforms:

1. Ethics: Balance speed with accuracy, avoid clickbait, respect copyrights.
2. Example: A Karachi-based website copying international articles without permission violates copyright law.

4) Social Media & Influencers:

1. Ethics: Verify content before sharing, label ads, avoid spreading hate speech.
2. Example: Viral unverified videos during protests in Karachi created panic – later proven fake.

5) Photojournalism & Video Journalism:

1. Ethics: Do not stage photos, avoid publishing graphic images unless public interest demands it.
2. Example: Publishing respectful images of flood victims rather than sensationalising their suffering.

6) Advertising & Public Relations:

1. Ethics: Do not mislead or disguise ads as news, ensure honesty in claims.

2. Example: Misleading advertisements about “miracle cures” in Pakistani newspapers are both unethical and illegal.

7) Entertainment Media (TV Dramas, Films, Online Content):

1. Ethics: Avoid promoting violence, discrimination, or harmful stereotypes.
2. Example: PEMRA has warned channels over dramas that show regressive portrayals of women.

6. Practical Rules / Checklist for Ethical Media:

- 1) Always verify facts with multiple sources before publishing.
- 2) Obtain consent when interviewing children, victims, or patients.
- 3) Clearly separate ads from editorial content.
- 4) Respect cultural and religious sensitivities in reporting.
- 5) Correct mistakes openly and quickly.
- 6) Protect confidential sources when revealing corruption or wrongdoing.
- 7) Use technology responsibly – reverse image search, metadata checks, to avoid fake news.

7. Legal & Regulatory Framework in Pakistan:

- 1) **PEMRA Ordinance & Code of Conduct** - Regulates TV and radio broadcasting.
- 2) **Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance 2002** - Monitors ethics in print journalism.
- 3) **Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016** - Regulates online content, cybercrimes, fake news.
- 4) **Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)** - Blocks unlawful online content.
- 5) **Pakistan Penal Code (Defamation Provisions)** - Legal penalties for false reporting that damages reputation.
- 6) **Copyright Ordinance (1962)** - Protects media content from piracy.

Example: In 2023, PTA blocked several websites spreading blasphemous content. Under PECA, online defamation cases are filed regularly in Karachi courts.

8. Contemporary Ethical Challenges in Pakistan:

- 1) **Misinformation & Fake News:** Spread quickly on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (X).
- 2) **Censorship vs. Free Expression:** Balancing removal of harmful content with the right to free speech.
- 3) **Journalist Safety:** Threats, harassment, and lawsuits against independent journalists.
- 4) **Paid News & Political Bias:** Media outlets promoting political interests for financial gain.
- 5) **Privacy in the Digital Age:** Growing concerns over surveillance and misuse of personal data.

Example: In 2022, unverified rumours about Karachi bank failures went viral on social media, causing unnecessary panic among citizens.

9. Conclusion & Reflection:

- 1) Media is a powerful tool for truth but can become a weapon for harm if misused.
- 2) Ethical guidelines are not restrictions but safeguards for credibility and fairness.
- 3) Pakistani society needs both free and responsible media.
- 4) For technology and business students: Media ethics apply to your future fields too – whether designing platforms, running PR campaigns, or building businesses, ethics is your brand's strongest asset.
- 5) **Closing Line:** “In the age of information, ethics is not an option – it is the only way to protect truth.”