

Framing Media Ethics: Repercussions in the Neo-liberal Culturescape

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ABSTRACT--- Modern mediascape replete with infotainment, videos, audios, ideas, news aggregating sites etc. Jon Tusa, the former Head of BBC opines, 'today's media-dense world has more choice, less diversity, more information, less knowledge and more gratification with less satisfaction.' Truly, from sunrise to sunset our worlds are filled with sights and sounds of the mass media. This brings forth negative repercussions on audience behaviour. The true objectives of ideal journalism have been thrown to the winds. Sensationalism and crass commercialization have become the order of the day. MoJo (Mobile Journalism) and Augmented Reality have revolutionized the media industry. The advent of Social Media too has added its mite to the whole conundrum. Modern social system force populace to depend more on various forms of media. This dependency depends on the division of the labour and increasing role specialization. People's affinity towards media is more during social upheavals and turns of fortune. But press as the Fourth Estate would help the nation builders to make India a modern, powerful, industrial state. Only then can India garner support and respect from the world community. It is high time India waged a war in the cultural realm of the country. A value-oriented media fraternity is the need of the hour rather than a market-oriented media culture. The whole media edifice has to be fortified by framing a concrete code of ethics for media practitioners. My paper unravels the ethical dilemma faced by media personnel and suggests an ideal modus operandi for journalists in a highly neo-liberalised culturescape.

Key words— Conundrum, MoJo, Augmented Reality, Framing, Neo-liberal

INTRODUCTION

The essence of ethics comes from the Rig Veda: Let noble thoughts come to us from every side. A modern version of this ancient Indian principle is from Mahatma Gandhi who wrote in the 'Young India' of June 1921. Gandhiji believed in the freedom of human kind. He did not expect a four-walled house with closed windows. He yearned for the wind of all cultures to blow freely through his house. This encompasses the Western Libertarian concept. Today, the democratic countries of the world have adopted this libertarian essence and embodied them in their constitution of fundamental laws. A free press is unstrained by any interests conflicting with that of journalism's proper aims of discovering and reporting the news. The reason why a press ought to be maximally free is that a free press is essential to the institution and maintenance of a free society. The two in the long run go intimately together; they cannot survive for long without one another. With freedom, in tune, comes responsibility. A free press as an abstraction of particular journalists and related media professionals accordingly has its own unique responsibilities that go along with its

freedom. In a free society, journalists play a distinctive role. They are the remote instruments of information gathering. A free society needs to make its decisions and plot its course in the world. They are Fourth Estate watchdogs who serve to keep elected and appointed officials on their toes, aware that what they do may be discovered and reported to the electorate at large, to hold them accountable for their actions or inaction. Journalists have the particular professional responsibility to report truthfully and accurately in a timely fashion on all relevant matters of public interest.

COMMUNICATIONS AND GOVERNMENT

According to Fred S Siebert, Director, Division of Mass Communications at Michigan State University reveals his basic objective of communication media. People worldwide should be able to bring forth a peaceful community along with appeasing their personal gratification. Siebert opines that government activities fall into four groups:

- Government as a restrictive agency
- Government as a regulating agency
- Government as a facilitating agency and
- Government as a participating agency

GOVERNMENT AS A RESTRICTIVE AGENCY

As a restrictive agency, the government function has been to keep certain types of communications content from the minds of its subjects or citizens. The government retains the right to restrict the distribution of obscenity, of libels on persons, of material tending to produce internal disorder. Truly, in the light of the constitutional provisions, the government today is exercising its restrictive function in the interests of the society. This is materialized through a complete evaluation of the existing restrictive statutes, orders, rules and practices of the various governmental units of our nation. It is known that certain types of communications content fail to contribute to the communications objective. The only way out is an organized solution adopted and enforced by government.

GOVERNMENT AS A REGULATING AGENCY

Discussions have been conducted always regarding the theory of the 'market place of information and ideas'. A free market place for information and ideas is the need of the hour. But government intervenes in 'branding and grading', producing serious errors. The governmental intervention should encourage the open market without branding the quality of information and ideas.



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GOVERNMENT AS A FACILITATING AGENCY

As communications directly contribute to the existence of a peaceful and productive society, active dialogues emerge regarding the kind of service government can offer to the media in achieving this goal. As the initial step, government can remove the stumbling blocks that hinder the path of the existing media. The government can also distribute necessary information by ensuring its availability in the society. New media should be enhanced to assist in giving awareness to the public concerning governmental activities.

GOVERNMENT AS A PARTICIPATING AGENCY

Government should definitely have direct contact with the people through government instruments. It is proactive that the government engage in direct communication activities than assuming the power to ‘label’ information distributed by private media. The government should keep itself away from the information content. Moreover, it should be efficient but cautious in regulating the market place. The government should be given freedom in facilitating the work of existing media.

GENESIS OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS

Different forms of media originated when primitive man experienced adversities and extreme weather conditions. Language came before history. Truly, the tool of alphabet came at the dawn of history. Meanwhile, man eked out highly ingenious ways of storing knowledge and disseminating information. Tom tom beats and smoke signals served as the first broadcasts. Cut stone tablets formed the first libraries. The Romans were the pioneers in publishing wall newspapers while in the Middle Ages, books and documents were churned out from wood blocks. Though they possessed paper, ink and metal types, the conditions were not congenial in Korea for the development of mass communication. But in Western Europe, with the invention of movable types by Gutenberg, the society was all set to develop the new device.

As the presses started bringing out books and documents, the new tool of print gained relevance in the social milieu. Men in power wielded this weapon and it became a medium of revolution. The first news sheets appeared as tools of commerce and the first books came out as tools of education. Magazines and pamphlets determined the political dynamics of 16th and 17th centuries. Mass Communication triggered the British, the American and the French Revolutions. In the 19th and 20th centuries, sweeping changes brought forth by Industrial Revolution, free public education, economic opportunity, political democracy and mass communication transformed human lives and national relations. The invention of the printing presses in the 15th century created an idealized version of man’s handwriting. Truly, in the laboratories of Daguerre, Edison, Bell and Marconi, a machine had been developed to see and hear for man at great distances. These two inventions had been so interwoven that they revolutionized the lives of people.

ADVENT OF TECHNOLOGY

Sherry Turkle, Professor of Social Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology opines that technology facilitates man to work on anything and from any place. It taxes people as they work harder on things. Truly, technology drains us and strains people’s lives. Turkle argues that though with profound possibilities, technology makes man lonely and alienated. The words of Sherry Turkle bear ample testimony of the present mediascape and the status quo of the modern media consumers. Digital world has taken over us and is designing our real lives. Emails, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Netflix animate our lives. It had ‘ritualized’ our lives in a different way. Based on the common behaviours of people, the young digitally connected adults are called ‘Generation C’. The letter C stands for ‘connected’ and they are noted for their ‘connectedness’. They often do everything using digital medium. Smart phones and iPads bring forth the latest news byte, gossip and other information bits. It is the greatest struggle to withdraw our eyes from the flashing notification in our phones for an incoming email, a text message, or a Facebook post. People consider smart phones ‘an extension of myself’. Nomophobia or ‘no mobile phone phobia’ is on the rise. It is the latest digital disorder that intimidates a person when he gets separated from his cell phone. Addictive bonds have been developed with our smart phones.

RELATIONSHIP WITH TECHNOLOGY

Our digital gadgets have changed our attitudes and demeanour. They have fragmented our focus. They are the ‘privileged intruders’ which provides a subtle excitement and arousal that overloads our brain’s pleasure system. This blog speaks volumes of a man’s relationship to his digital world: ‘In real life people make demands of me. It takes energy to connect and talk and work through conflict and resolve issues. My smart phone makes no such demands on me. It offers pleasure 24x7. My brain craves the instant gratification and pleasures the text or email offers. The more I look at it and use it the more dependent I become on it.’ Some people report that they receive ‘phantom vibrations’ even when they seldom have mobile phones with them. Psychologists name this disorder as ‘Phantom Cell Phone Vibration Disorder’ or PCVD. But the problem becomes grave when the whole culture gets embedded in technology. It is reshaping our lives. Moreover, the digital age is moulding the parent-child relationships in queer and unprecedented ways. The strong attachment to our digital gadgets brings forth drastic changes in the societal values and mores.

CONNECTED SOCIALLY, BUT DISCONNECTED

It is alarming to note that the digital world is transforming our social connections. ‘The more we connect, the better’ has become the new-gen motto. Technologically we are more connected today, but ideally we are more disconnected than ever before. Skype, Facebook, smart phones, and all other social networking applications



prevent us from forming real, intimate social connections. Dr Nicole M Radziwill in her book 'Disconnected' reveals the dilemma

of a social media addict. Being herself in the grip of addiction, she can't help checking her social media apps at regular intervals.

Radziwill argues that the modern society has become more disconnected, impersonal and blatantly 'faceless'. In the digital world we experience 'pseudo connections' as a society, not the direct face-to-face connections. Dr Nicholas Carr, an expert in digital technology warns that technology is making us 'shallow thinkers'. His conviction is that shallow thinking reverts us to shallow living. William Powers explains his concerns in his book 'Hamlet's Blackberry'. He elucidates about the tangles within the human psyche, to control one's emotions and feelings.

FACEBOOK ADDICTION

Excessive use of social media programmes like Facebook can become an addiction. Teenagers and women often spend more time online accessing social media. Social psychologists term such addiction as 'FAD' – Facebook Addiction Disorder. This condition is characterized by spending too much time on Facebook thus toppling the healthy balance of the individual's life. Globally, people suffer from this malady. 'Psychology Today' reveals that social media influence people negatively than narcotics. Michael W Austin in 'Ethics for Everyone' opines that keeping oneself away from social media is more painful than giving up drugs. This study highlighted that people can't resist their yearning to be online with social media. A Facebook encounter was more expected by many than the desire to consume alcohol or tobacco. People with addictive personalities easily get influenced and overwhelmed by social media. Truly, forming addiction to one behaviour or substance can enhance the risk of forming another addiction.

AFFAIRS ON FACEBOOK

Studies unravel that one in five divorces involve Facebook affairs. Alarmingly, 57 per cent of people use Facebook to flirt. 38 per cent people engage themselves in perverted communication. People indulge in reckless social media communication which have led to unholy relationships. Fuelling an improper relationship on internet has hampered thousands of marriages. This cannot be considered as the fault of social networking sites or internet, but these tools enhances the intensity of the malady. Connecting with long lost school pals can also cause a disconnect from your spouse.

MARRIAGE AND THE DIGITAL IMPACT

Dramatic increase in cyber-affairs is affecting marriages in a shocking way. Dr Sharon Hart May, marriage expert believes that the internet is doing more harm than help to marriages. Internet prevents couple from hobnobbing and making emotional and physical connections. This becomes a 'competing attachment' to their marriage. People who are

lonely or emotionally disconnected use social media to distract. Continuous exposure to Facebook make you send private messages to the person so that others can't see what you are sending. Often, the person doesn't want to de-friend or cut off contact with the other person even when the spouse demands it. Intimacy deficiency is the problem of digital invasion. Though tech-savvy people can convey information easily and effectively, they fail to handle emotions and feelings. Digital intimacy is far away from true intimacy. Even when we are emotionally disconnected, cyber encounters create the illusion of real intimacy. Psychologists suggest various methods to come out of the impasse. The person has to find out four or five key relationships which he/she would like to invest in. Allot time for them in the daily schedule and indulge in real conversations. Man has tremendous potential for intimate relationships. Intimacy is about seeing each other clearly and completely with as little distortion as possible. Without forming connections, try to have conversations with people. Sharing feelings, thoughts and one's heart can foster true relationships. Real-life encounters are worthy and will enhance the spirit of true relationships which thrive and flourish.

ISSUE OF REGULATION

The trajectory of media registered rapid growth rates. Though Press Council of India is at the helm of affairs with rules and regulations, it is only a paper tiger with rubber teeth. Though a quasi-judicial body, it lacks punitive powers. Media organizations are supposed to be well-armed with punitive sanctions. Petty partisan tendencies have made the regulatory mechanism a farce. Today, the advertising industry brings forth the needed revenue for mass media, which will not be in the larger interest of the public. The man in the street, who is the common citizen is in a conundrum. India can imbibe the media regulatory mechanisms prevailing in countries like USA, France etc. where they nurture public interest cherishing the values enshrined in the constitution.

The Indian Judicial system is of a different structure. Here, it is a herculean process taking months and even years before coming up with a permanent solution. In India, multiple ownership is out of question. There is no comprehensive policy which binds various media platforms like newspapers, radio, television, internet, social media etc. Though the largest democracy in the world, India lacks strong media watch groups with objective and systematic media review. The magnitude and enormity of the media system prevents judicious media criticism. In the absence of government and industry regulation, even civil society has been unable to provide an effective de facto media regulation mechanism.

TELEVISION NEWS

News remains a major source of income for network television where most of the profits are currently to be made. As expensive as it is to produce news, it is far more expensive to provide sporting events, situation comedies or any other regularly featured television offering. Journalists are supposed to report the



news as accurately and objectively as possible. On the other hand, they are supposed to help the companies that employ them turn a profit or at least to minimize expenses. These two goals are at times in conflict and create a dilemma about which master to serve. They find themselves in the octopus grip of moral ideals of their profession and often less tractable market place realities. Television is a wonderful source of information and entertainment. It offers a living window on the world that is hard to match in any other medium. Television distorts viewer's focus at times and at certain other points of time make them couch-potatoes.

Television is the extra-ordinarily useful way to learn things about the world. It has an immediacy and range that cannot be duplicated by print or audio. Television put forth several ethical questions that it is not only a conduit for news information, but a highly profitable enterprise. Private channels are not merely news providers. They reveal that they are entirely dependent on advertising revenue and it appears that advertisers have poured enormous amount of money into those channels that perceive as getting the larger numbers of viewers. In the rat race to catch more viewers, some channels are not hesitant to compromise with the truth. Others have taken recourse to sensationalism, and all kinds of stories are shown as news. The ethics of journalism constitutes a special topic area in the general field of applied professional ethics. Journalists are professionals of a specific sort and the work they do because it is undertaken by fallible persons who must decide how they will pursue their work in light of its impact on others, is subjected to specific moral considerations involving a specific set of moral principles or rules of contest. While reporting news, often the issue of entertainment generates certain ethical questions regarding news collection and dissemination. It is an element of news reporting that dovetails in important ways with the fact that journalism is a way of making money. While reporting, soft news pieces can unify people socially and enhance their comprehension on contemporary issues. Sometimes through comic relief, and there by provide a perspective on various aspects, especially of popular cultures, that can often be justified as communication in the public interest. Veracity and honesty should be close associates of a journalist. This is achieved through diligence and prudent observation. Truth is not something mysterious or impossible. It entails difficulties for the truth is not always easy to discover or communicate to others. Falsehood can enter news reporting in a variety of ways through careless use of unreliable sources and in many deliberate and inadvertent ways. Rogue reporters deliberately make use of falsehoods and their professional misconduct is morally intolerable. Journalistic fraud should be exposed at any cost and impose appropriate professional sanctions against the deliberate purviewing of falsehoods in the press and all news media.

MASS MEDIA AND MASS REALITY

Modern mass media are miles and miles away from social reality. Generally, media tend to focus on certain posh quarters which serve as the Potemkin villages where all is glamour and show business. India is going through a turbulent period in its history. The uncivilized honour killings in certain parts of the country like Uttar Pradesh of

young men and women who get married or wish to get married among other incidents show the backwardness of modern India – casteism and communalism have not gone from the soil.

Mass media instruments are tools of social upliftment and growth. People rely more on mass media at times of revolution and renaissance. This dependency stems on the division of labour and increasing role specialization. Both create problems of co-ordination and control in modern societies and mass media as a formalized means of communication, helps resolve this problem. Media dependency theory attempts to explain the growth of the media and increasing dependence that people have on media.

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