Digital Media Ethics and the Role of Media
A case study of Pakistan

Muhammad Nasir,
Department of Communication and Media Studies,
Sarhad University of Science & Information Technology, Peshawar-Pakistan

Abstract

Globally, Digital Media Ethics relates to the diverse ethical problems, practices and norms of
digital news media, which includes online journalism, blogging, digital photojournalism, citizen
journalism and social media. It also includes questions about how professional journalism should
use this new media to research and publish stories, as well as how to use text or images provided
by citizens. For Pakistan, although, it is a new concept, however, due to launch of numerous TV
channels during last decade and spread of social media activities, it is gaining wide popularity
and most of the national level electronic/print media concerns are diverting to it with fast pace. In
this study, we will try to determine the Digital Media Ethics and the role of media with particular
reference to Pakistan and suggest ways and means for its further development to bring positive
change in the society.

Key words: Pakistan, Media, Ethics, Digital, Print, Electronic, PEMRA.

Background

The term media is derived from Medium, which means carrier or mode. Media denotes an item
specifically designed to reach a large audience or viewers. The term was first used with the
advent of newspapers and magazines. However, with the passage of time, the term broadened by
the inventions of radio, TV, cinemas and Internet.

Currently, media has become almost as necessary as other amenities of life like food and
clothing. It is true that media is playing an extra-ordinary role in strengthening the society. Thus
the basic objectives of media are (i) to inform, (ii) to educate, (iii) to entertain and (iv) to mould
the opinion of the people. It helps us to know current situation around the world. The media has a
strong social and cultural impact upon society as well as it can play an effective role to bring
positive change in the society. Because of its inherent ability to reach larger number of public, it is widely used to convey message to build public opinion and awareness.

In the making of public opinion, print media has always played a robust role, and more significantly in those times when electronic media was nowhere. Since the media and the society are essentially inter-linked with each other, a healthy balance between the two pillars of society is imperative, in case the one should dictate the other for very untenable reasons.

If too much domination of the media, both electronic and print, is undesirable and uncalled for, it is equally unethical if the media becomes the slave of the society and caters to its transitory tastes rather than highlighting the real problems of the people. An increased interaction between both the media and the people can help enlarge their territories and thus keep at bay certain forces that are out of malign and make a fool of both.

In some quarters there are apprehensions that today we are all being bombarded for twenty-four hours a day by television programs and the daily newspaper too are touching every aspects of our lives. They are giving information, influencing our impulses or inclinations and judgments, loudly and insistently propagating certain ideas, and offering solutions in the form of policies and programs.

They not only inform, influence, reason and argue with us but, wittingly or unwittingly intimidate us. In their intense competition to be heard (read) and influence (impress), we are constantly bombarded with words and more words. Words are fast losing their luster and freshness and the capability to embody delicate and healthy individual meanings and experiences.

In case the media should consider its liberty as license, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of Pakistan and National Electronic and Print Media Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) have issued a set of guidelines. Since we have a religious, multi linguistic and cultural society, any provocative writing can lead to distrust and dis-affection among the people. In view of the very sensitive composition of our set up, it was enjoined upon the press that provocative and sensational headlines be avoided.
Media Ethics

Media ethics is the sub-division of applied ethics dealing with the specific ethical principles and standard of media, including broadcast media, film, theatre, arts, print media and the internet. The field covers many varied and highly controversial topics, ranging from war journalism to advertising.

The emphasis is on informing, educating, entertaining and persuading the audience to believe in the substance that is news being telecast on TV. The challenges, however, before a TV reporter are ethical.

Jack Lynch, a Professor of Mass Communication says: “In this information age, Journalists are not disconnected observers but actual participants in the way communities and societies understand each other and the way parties wage conflict…. There is no way of knowing that what Journalists are seeing or hearing would have happened the same way – if at all – if no press was present. This means that policies are born with a media strategy built-in…. Every time facts get reported, it adds to the collective understanding of how similar facts will be reported in future. That understanding then informs people’s behavior. This is the feedback loop”.

Journalism is, thus, a field or a profession that matters, where each journalist and his decisions make a difference to the lives of the public and the audience. Journalists do retain some agency. They are reflective practitioners. They work for and inform the discussions of the public sphere. As Lynette Sheridan Burns says: “Professional integrity is not something you have when you are feeling a bit down at the end of a long week. It is a state of mindfulness that you bring to everything you write, no matter how humble the topic is”.

Role of journalist becomes a very responsible one, where he does not only have to think about it or take about the subject matter, but even be able to do something about it. That is the basic expectation of any citizen from a working professional called a Journalist.
Digital Media Ethics

A media revolution is transforming, fundamentally and irrevocably, the nature of journalism and its ethics. The means to publish is now in the hands of citizens, while the internet encourages new forms of journalism that are interactive and immediate.

Our media ecology is a chaotic landscape evolving at a furious pace. Professional journalists share the journalistic sphere with tweeters, bloggers, citizen journalists, and social media users.

Amid every revolution, new possibilities emerge while old practices are threatened. Today is no exception. The economics of professional journalism struggles as audiences migrate online. Shrinkage of newsrooms creates concern for the future of journalism. Yet these fears also prompt experiments in journalism, such as non-profit centers of investigative journalism.

A central question is to what extent existing media ethics is suitable for today’s and tomorrow’s news media that is immediate, interactive and “always on” – a journalism of amateurs and professionals. Most of the principles were developed over the past century, originating in the construction of professional, objective ethics for mass commercial newspapers in the late 19th century.

We are moving towards a mixed news media – a news media citizen and professional journalism across many media platforms. This new mixed news media requires a new mixed media ethics – guidelines that apply to amateur and professional whether they blog, Tweet, broadcast or write for newspapers. Media ethics needs to be rethought and reinvented for the media of today, not of yesteryear.

Differences between media ethics and other fields of applied ethics

The issues of freedom of speech and aesthetic values (taste) are primarily at home in media ethics. However, a number of further issues distinguish media ethics as a field in its own right.

A theoretical issue peculiar to media ethics is the identity of observer and observed. The press is one of the primary guardians in a democratic society of many of the freedom, right and duties discussed by other fields of applied ethics. In media ethics, the ethical obligations of the
guardians themselves come more strongly into the foreground. Who guard the guardians? This question also arises in the field of legal ethics.

A further self-referential or circular characteristic in media ethics is the questioning of its own values. Meta-issues can become identical with the subject matter of media ethics. This is most strongly seen when artistic elements are considered. Benetton advertisements and turner prize candidates are both examples of ethically questionable media uses which question their own questioner.

Another characteristic of media ethics is the desperate nature of its goals. Ethical dilemmas emerge when goals conflict. The goals of media usage diverge sharply. Expressed in a consequentiality manner, media usage may be subject to pressures to maximize entertainment value, information provision, the upholding of democratic freedoms, the development of art and culture, fame and vanity.

**Clashing Views on Media Ethics in Pakistan**

A layman thinks that the business of media is easy. After all, all one has to do is talk or write. They even seem to know what ‘news’ is. But here is the thing: if all, ‘new events’ were appropriately considered news and reported as such, then there would not be enough airtime on television – and newspapers would be about the size of the encyclopedia Britannica and anything of interest to us would be lost in a welter of information that we could not possibly process. Hence, we need some idea as to what guides the process of selection and to enable us to distinguish newsworthy events from merely news events.

For the purpose of news selection, there is a generally accepted norm of ‘public interest’ developed over time. This includes protection of public health, national security, crime and social behavior, significant incompetence in public offices and other ancillary issues relating to and which affect the society at large. However, this is just a broad concept of ‘the public interest’ because really there is no firm definition of the term. A BBC Policy Maker once said: “it is hard to define the public interest with any immense clarity, because the moment you start defining things, its what you thereby exclude”.

Another senior BBC radio figure said: “it will always be grey area. There are never simply two sides to a story, there’s a multiplicity of sides, which stretches out and stretches back. There’s a multiplicity of effects and of what’s in the public interest, which will vary from issue to issue, from story to story. I don’t see how you can logically, and rationally, impose some sort of blueprint which enables you to know whether it’s in the public interest or not”.

The truth, unfortunately, is relative. One man’s truth is another man’s distortion. People differentiate between truth and falsity through a certain sieve they adhere to. And in today’s world where there is a cocktail of religious ideologies and philosophies, figuring out the truth is at best an educated guess—unless of course the whole world starts seeing things through a single lens.

Moreover, at the heart of media’s obfuscation is the question of how to differentiate between objective and subjective realities. This confusion worsens in case of a conflict because it is not in the nature of the conflict to be balanced. There will always be, whether it is a military or diplomatic conflict, at least one party which acts in excess relative to the other party/parties. “To be a good patriot – One must become the enemy of the rest of mankind” - Voltaire

Some insist on including patriotism as one of the benchmarks of media ethics. This would require the media to side with the government in many cases to exhibit and promote national unity. But then in a political climate as volatile as Pakistan’s where many leaders are alleged to be traitors and conspirators, identifying patriots is a tricky call. The dilemma worsens if a country is actually at fault; then should journalists care about national interest or should they stick to the hallmark of truth and provide all true news for greater interest of the ‘global society’ considering the globalized world we live in?

For instance, the Japanese Finance Minister was recently seen drunk in public. Was it ethical for Japanese media to raise hue and cry over it or not? Similarly, Mumbai blasts case was ‘mishandled’ by Pakistan government, some critics say. should journalists analyze the case? If they question any government in such circumstances they are perhaps compromising national unity, image and pride. But if they do not, they are not building a perspective enough to help the public chose better leaders.
With so many comparative ethical standards, perhaps now critics outside the industry know what journalists do and how complex it is, and how it makes them feel torn between right and wrong every day. I think media in Pakistan deserve a little appreciation here. But if one still doubts this, stay tuned.

Tools of Media

Newspaper and Magazine

Newspaper and Magazine are the major tools of print media disseminating news on regular basis to their readers. There are hundreds of thousands newspapers and magazines exist globally, which are providing information to the people in the shape of news, articles, features, columns, etc. on daily basis.

Television

Television is one of the most important media of mass communication. Common people may watch television at least one hour every day. Some people usually meet news through television and others may want to watch dramas or variety shows. We can watch a lot of programs according to our tastes through television. Nielsen media research (1998) reported: “Television was introduced to the U.S.A. at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York.

After two years, the Federal Communications Commission licensed and approved the first commercially available television stations. In 1950, about 9% of American homes had TV sets. Since 1985, television ownership has been about 98%” (cited in Bushman, 2001, p. 477). Since television was invented, media became very popular in our life. Now almost all families have television at least one at home. Television has developed since 1930 as amazing invention can give people a lot of information and enjoyment through video and audio both.

Most Americans watch television for 3 to 5 hours per day. As much as television has become famous to people, it causes many problems too. The violence of television’s programs has very serious effects. In television programs, we can easily see a recurrence of a case. It causes
imitative crimes. Brandon Centerwall, a professor at the University of Washington reported that from 1945 to 1974, 93% of the murder rate has been increased.

It shows that television teaches violence, and it also makes people be unconcerned about violence. It can also cause antisocial actions. Television can bring addiction, which is one problem appeared since mass media was developed. TV addiction is similar with other addictions like drugs addiction or gambling. Especially TV addiction is bad for children. “A child who watched two hours of television a day before age three would be 20 percent more likely to have attention problems at age seven compared with a child who did not watch television” (Christakis, 2004).

Television programs are contained to the violent acts and sensational contents more and more by pursuing commercial value. Moreover, they also maintain that television is forcing simple thoughts. Television gives us a lot of information but they can just give that. Viewers just can accept television’s information we cannot communicate with. It is sure that the invention of television brought great development in our society. However, as the market of broadcast has been bigger, programs in television has been contained more violence and exaggerated. These things give children and teenagers bad effects, so all broadcast need to adjust their program contents.

**Radio**

Radio, being the most effective electronic medium of communication, is also the first with the news, like newspaper, and has several news bulletin within 24 hours

**Internet**

The number of people using the internet has grown exponentially since the emergence of World Wide Web about 15 years ago. No one is exactly sure how many people have online access. According to NUA Internet Survey (2002), it was estimated the number of internet users is approximately 600 million people in 2002. The popularity of the WWW, combined with the pervasiveness of computer technology in general, means that people are becoming increasingly reliant on technology and the Internet to conduct their day-to-day and work activities.
Although internet appeared as a new medium of media and it formed new society, internet is not mixed with society where we live, so it caused many problems. We can accept tremendous information via internet because people in all over the world could share their information on network. However, as much as there is a lot of knowledge, in internet there is also information not true and useless.

Also, since internet was popularized, many illegal crimes have been happened through internet. These crimes committed through the use of computer are called cybercrime. Cybercrime is a real and growing problem that costs governments, businesses, and individual computer users millions of dollars annually and that facilitates many of the same crimes committed in real space, such as identity theft and the trafficking of child pornography, only on a larger scale. The Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) revealed the U.S.A. lost about 240 million dollars from online crime during 2007.

**Role of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)**
PEMRA has been established under PEMRA Ordinance–2002 to facilitate and regulate the private electronic media. The Authority is responsible for facilitating and regulating the establishment and operation of all broadcast media and distribution services in Pakistan established for the purpose of international, national, provincial, district, and local or special target audiences with the following major objectives:

- To improve the standards of information, education and entertainment;
- To enlarge the choice available to the people of Pakistan in the media for news, current affairs, religious knowledge, art, culture, science, technology, economic development, social sector concerns, music, sports, drama and other subjects of public and national interest;
- To facilitate the devolution of responsibility and power to the grass roots by improving the access of the people to mass media at the local and community level; and

To ensure accountability, transparency and good governance by optimization the free flow of information.
Conclusion

The media has the power of educating people, the good and the bad. Since it affects the eyes, the ears and the mind simultaneously nothing can overcome the influence of the media. The media in the advanced society should perform a noble mission of enlightening people and discourage sectarian, communal and divisive trends.

Although sufficient work has been done to formulate code of conduct to regulate electronic media (TV) in Pakistan, however, this can not be termed as final effort on part of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan. Mere drafting of rules and codes of conduct do not work, until strict implementation is not ensured. In Pakistan, there are number of laws, formulated for the welfare of general masses, but their implementation is really a yeoman job. One can not feel secured and respected unless the laws, rules and regulations are implemented effectively and implemented across the board. From top level to lower level all and sundry should come under the law, and no leniency should be made to anyone.

In Pakistan about 100 TV Channels, about 30-40 FM Radio Channels, more than 500 Cable Operators, and hundreds of Newspapers and Magazines are telecasting, broadcasting, and publishing news as well as other entertainment programs, which are useful, effective, and efficient service providers. But still there is a dire need to improve their services by implementing laws, and codes of conducts in its true letter and spirit to provide more realistic, improved, and informative programs and news to the audience.
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