

Indian Media – Social Responsibility and the Challenges Ahead

“Congress shall make no law...abridging the *freedom* of speech or of the *press*...”
The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

This paper examines the ‘Social Responsibility of the media in today’s scenario.’ The job and responsibility of media is to uphold truth, integrity and be socially responsible. The goal of my paper is to clarify the definition of social responsibility, coupled with examples of its applications in impractical journalism practices. By achieving a more comprehensive understanding of what social responsibility means in the field of media, one becomes better equipped to formulate media laws that are effective and hold the potential to result in improving the role of media in society.

The present paper attempts to propose how the media, while having to report on violence, conflict and bloodshed, should go beyond short-term goals, and tell stories that connect communities, foster unity and promotes development and peace. Citizens as well as media professionals must strive to make media in India more real, objective, truthful, dispassionate, and last but not least socially responsible.

Media is deviating from the laws, ethics and principles that it should follow. These days, it is nothing but a money minting business that ignores its social responsibilities. However, it's high time now that society demands a change and this is one of the reasons we have assembled here to discuss, debate and come to an agreeable conclusion. We might not come to solution/s which all of us agree but this will be surely the first step towards making the media more sensitive towards the aspirations of masses and their responsibility for all the stake holders related to media.

The question of social responsibility in the media continues to be timely and topical. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I & B) has asked the Indian Press Institute (I.P.I) to study the phenomena of “ paid news” and come up with suggestions to counter this dangerous phenomena.

It is said, truth, is the biggest casualty in a war. For truth to be a casualty one need not wait for war. Truth is being put to test and sacrificed almost daily in the many media altars of the world. Speed and competition have reduced media’s commitment to verify and counter check information. Accuracy has become a major victim in the age of instant communication. Today it is easy to plant a big lie or distortion along with truth and get some of the media audience to believe it.

The quantum of information/ news the media as well as the masses are exposed to at any given time increased multifold. Nowadays we hear of information glut or overload leading to attention blink. Quantitative increase in the news and information one needs to handle and process has considerably reduced the possibility of being critical, of verifying facts and checking veracity of sources.

Often the audience lacks the time and wherewithal necessary to check and double check and verify what they read, hear or watch. It is in this context that we underline the need for professional competence and social responsibility as essential requirements for media house and the media persons in particular; this will help in ensuring that they report events objectively and accurately.

Audience is left with the option of either accepting the lie as truth or suspend judgment and strives to look for other perspectives. It is not easy considering the fact that they do not often have the adequate tools to check the veracity of news and information concerning people and places which are far away from them. Even if such tools did exist, they are not fool proof due to many subjective factors under which media might undertake to do the verification. Normally the masses tend to trust the media, and therefore, the media must ensure that the trust the audience repose on it is not belied and taken for granted.

Let me start by giving some gory examples of sensationalism by media at its best:

(01) A 14-year-old girl gets murdered brutally and what we see on our television screens is transcripts of her online chats and her personal messages flashed repeatedly.

(02) A three year old boy falls accidentally in a well

(03) A bomb blast leaves a city shattered and what we read in our newspapers are arguments of political parties blaming each other.

(04) And not to forget, the breaking news that's on the news channels 24x7 that a bird got stuck on a tree and was rescued by fire-fighters

(05) And last but not the least that Rakhi Sawant slapped her boyfriend Abhishek on valentine day.

Do I need to give you more examples to prove how the standards of media are deteriorating today? Indeed, media today has become totally unaware to its responsibilities.

It is deviating from the laws, ethics and principles that it needs and ought to follow.

To prove and explain this statement of mine a little more, let me once again take the example of Arushi murder case, which was a pure case of defamation and highest degree of unjustified reporting. Defamation as defined legally is any matter that is likely to injure the reputation of any person, living or dead. And it's so unfortunate that the media which should have been doing investigative reporting to find out the culprit/s, was instead, busy pointing a finger at the deceased girl's character, her parent's character and integrity. To make the matter more disgusting the media went one step ahead to the extent of revealing her personal messages.

Another example of non-ethical journalism was recently seen, when pictures of injured victims of the Delhi bomb blasts were shown on television. According to

media ethics, the media is strictly prohibited to do so. But it still did it. And not just this time. They also did it even when dead bodies of the soldiers were shown during the Kargil War. It was in such bad taste.

Indeed, media today no longer cares about the responsibility that it has towards the public, the responsibility of bringing the truth ethically and objectively without hurting anybody's sentiments and the consequence of this is over-hyped news.

Today's media actually sensationalizes news. Giving out facts and details to the public which are not true, or even worse, manufacturing them, is what has become the latest trend. Even if media is in the business of selling, where do we draw a line? What exactly is the limit?

An example of this was the sting operation on Uma Khurana – a school teacher who was publicly humiliated and became the victim of a petty revenge planned by a businessman, Virender Arora, who tipped off his journalist friend in order to gain publicity. Khurana was accused of pushing her students into prostitution, whereas the unedited tapes revealed that she refused to do any such thing.

Sting operations these days are mere attempts to sensationalize news and gain television rating points (TRPs), increase the readership rather than highlighting legitimate public interest issues. They have become a source to fill in time-slots on 24-hour news channels which constantly need something on air and the extra pages in the supplement section of the newspaper or magazines.. And they hardly follow the principle on which they are supposed to be conducted, which is to reveal the truth to the public about various concerning issues.

I sincerely believe, that instead of being 'of', 'with' and 'for' the masses and serving them, media has distanced itself from the common masses. Today's media looks for big, grand issues to be covered as news stories instead of stories at the grass root level.

We hardly find news from rural India or villages,

The miserable conditions, in which the people were living in Surat, never attracted the media's attention, until the outbreak of plague there. In Surat, 54 deaths were reported but the scale of the media reports and the panic created, led some to call it, 'plague by the media'. Even the legendary Kapil Dev, too was not spared and serious questions were raised on his intention/s, character. He was branded as a traitor. The enquiry later found there was not an iota of truth in the allegations hurled by disgraced ex- cricketer Manoj Parbhakar.

All this points to some unanswered questions – where are we heading? Why isn't the media fulfilling its responsibility? And why has it become so laid back? The media has very conveniently chosen to ignore all this and continues to be in a mess.

It is high time now and we are in desperate need of media that becomes an effective instrument of social change and not one that ignores society altogether. Otherwise, media will be nothing but a money minting business, which has no ethics, no essence and no responsibility

The newsroom definition of “media ethics” can translate into the broader concept of “social responsibility”, which is appropriate for the purpose of reasoning in sociological or legal terms. At first sight, the topic hinges on the question of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not, in the ways that the media collects and publishes information. However, discussing the definition of social responsibility runs the risk of falling into a normative or prescriptive framework, which is ultimately of little practical use, given that media ethics principles will be differently relevant depending on the specific context, journalists and audiences involved.

In dealing with media ethics, there is some confusion between the different terms:

accountability, liability, responsibility, etc. Within journalism one could define accountability narrowly as being able to produce records, e.g. evidence to support what has been reported on. However, the meaning of this term is often extended to overlap with the concept of liability and responsibility: in other words, a journalist is also accountable in that he or she is held liable for the consequences of his or her reporting. Liability in this case can be taken to signify being ethically or legally responsible for one’s actions; the concept of whether or not to consider journalists as being liable for their reporting hinges on the question of whether or not their profession entails a social responsibility.

The distinction between accountability and responsibility can be held as such: *“Whereas accountability often is referred to as the manifestation of claims to responsibility, the latter is the acknowledged obligation for action or behavior within frameworks of roles and morals”* (Plaisance, 2000). Responsibility is in this sense the obligation for proper custody, care and safekeeping of one’s audience. More specifically, *social responsibility* entails the necessity for the journalist to keep society’s interest as a top priority. This can also be seen as a collective responsibility or public interest responsibility.

Defining social responsibility in the media traces back to a key landmark in the field: that is, a report produced by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, more casually known as the Hutchins Commission. The project was requested in 1942 by the founder of Time magazine Henry Luce, at a time when it was believed that First Amendment freedoms were being increasingly threatened by the rise of totalitarian regimes throughout the world (Blevins, 1997). Led by the then-president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, this commission deliberated for four years before settling in 1947 on the following five guidelines for a socially responsible press in a report title A

Free and Responsible Press:

- (1) a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning;*
- (2) a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;*
- (3) the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society;*
- (4) the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society;*
- (5) full access to the day's intelligence.*

I feel the media should be accountable and responsible to the various stake holders in the following ways:

- " First and foremost to their audiences, to whom they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorializing.*
- To government, to which they owe constructive criticism, a relay of popular opinion and adequate feedback from the populace.*
- To their proprietor, to whom they owe the survival of the media organization as a business venture as well as a veritable source of education, enlightenment and entertainment.*
- To themselves, to whom they owe fulfillment in their calling, satisfaction and an entire success story. When any of these "judges" of journalistic responsibility is shunted, accountability is dented and automatically, responsibility is affected adversely." (Owens-Ibie, 1994)*

I strongly believe that to be relevant and meaningful, every media house must have a social and clear conscience. The social responsibility of media is an extremely important issue and that to in a developing democracy like India. In a diverse country of 1.2 billion people, there are bound to be differences in opinion, preference and taste, in attitude and ideology and in language and political likings, I firmly believe that the plurality of our society is reflected in the diversity of our media and its reporting too.

According to me, media has a significant and indispensable place in our lives. It brings to us the true face of today's world – a face which is usually hidden from the common man. It makes us realize that we are being ruled by the wrong people – politicians who are only interested in their personal gains and not the welfare of their people. I salute the media for its incomparable contribution... which will definitely, benefit the nation and its people in the long run. Still all is not lost, we indeed need to introspect and see what and where we are lacking. We need to devise practical and prompt solution to tackle the menace of irresponsible media mannerism.

I would like to end my paper by quoting the famous words of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) *Third president of the United States, I quote*

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.”