

The Sine Qua Non for Revisiting the Ethics of Journalism

Dr. Suman Kumar Kasturi*

"We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror." - Marshall McLuhan

Abstract

The year 2020 marked the centenary year of media education in India. The set of journalistic ethics remain unaffected even though media technologies have changed and so has its consumption pattern, especially during the last two decades. Meanwhile, the social media has made an impact. The User Generated Content on social media platforms has to be taken for scrutiny before it is published, meaning that the ethical guidelines need to be revisited and a new set of guidelines are required to be framed. This paper examines the need for the same and also brings out an apparent solution to this problem.

Introduction

Communication is vital for the survival of the human race. As history advanced, communication, which began as aboriginal cave paintings and signed language, has morphed into an infinite variety of ways to express oneself to other humans. Media education has followed just like the way of evolution of mankind over the centuries.

The evolution of mass communication goes back to many centuries; from the time Ts'ai Lun invented the paper in 105 AD during the Han Dynasty in China (Suman Kumar Kasturi, 2015:30) to the clout of electronic media today along with modern gadgets and

* Former Senior Sub Editor, The Hans India, Hyderabad.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution. It has completely changed the way people and organisations communicate across the world.

The history of media education in India commenced in the year 1920 at the Adyar National University in Madras. Dr Annie Besant introduced the first-ever media course in India at this University.

This paper aims to bring out the importance of media ethics in accordance with the changing dimensions of media technologies and media education. Let's begin our discussion by first comprehending the meaning of media literacy education and subsequently delve into discussion about the ethics of journalism in the digital age.

Media literacy education

The term media originates from the Latin word *medius*, meaning simply middle or something in between. Even so, Marshall McLuhan used this term in a sense of means of mass communication. Media literacy embraces the practices that sanction people to the right of entry, create or manipulate media. Also, it approves people to critically evaluate media content. In a nutshell, media literacy education allows upholding awareness of media effect and also to create a dynamic standpoint headed for both creating and consuming media content.

As the evolution of humans grew, the advancement of media and media education has also transpired. As cited at the beginning of the article, we drive into the future using only our rearview mirror - broadcast media have led to a new media while looking into the rearview mirror called print media. That's why according to the author, broadcast media is the golden mean of mass media. The print media and broadcast media have adopted ethics as prerequisite rudiments, both in education and in practice. It could become a possibility because these forms of media are governed by socially responsible educational institutions, media houses and personnel.

However, the same is not the case with the new media, because the User Generated Content (UGC) has no regulatory control over it. According to the ancient Greeks, it was of great importance to have literate and educated citizens in a democratic society. Evidently,

according to the empowerment approach, the same holds equally good to be a media literate in the digital information age. For this to happen, ethics are extremely important.

Categorically, web 2.0 applications enhanced the obvious need of human beings to connect and communicate. Henry Jenkins welcomed us to the world of convergence culture, a sphere where old and new media bump into each other (Henry Jenkins, 259: 2006). The achievement of users over conventional mass media prominently proved to be reasonable as web 2.0 offered unparalleled tools for empowerment and online self-communication. Nevertheless, its outsized anticipations nourished a premature winning mood among the web idealists.

Social media have become a major part of the present-day academics, media, advertising and public relations industries, of political campaigning, and several other aspects of our daily existence due to aforesaid astounding observable fact involving both rapid emergence of this cutting edge technology and its adoption. The incorporation of this massive media upsurge brings with it challenges and opportunities, especially legal and ethical issues. Let's discuss the ethics of journalism in the ensuing session.

Ethics of journalism in digital age

Ethics of social media lie in the foundation of the notion that social media is not about the exploitation of technology but service to society—a typical new way of social service. According to Immanuel Kant, a famous German philosopher of the 18th century, if a person violates the rights of others, he would become guilty insofar as the law is concerned. However, if ethics is taken into consideration, he would become guilty even if he thinks of doing so (Anthony Reyes et.al, 2011:338).

Ethics is an area of study that deals with moral principles and values—ideas about discriminating good and bad. When we apply the ethical principles to conduct roles and content of the mass media, in particular, the same may be referred to as media ethics. Media ethics could be broadly categorised as journalistic ethics and advertising ethics. These ethics are also applicable to the field of mass media study.

With the advent of social media, the manner we get media services, the manner we think of media, and various other issues have been changed. When compared with conventional media, social media differs in many ways. Let's define ethics to converse further.

Definition of ethics

Understanding ethics is essential to understand the proper application of ethical approaches to social media. There is some confusion between morality and ethics. According to Scott B. Rae, the two terms morality and ethics are used interchangeably. However, they differ; while morality refers to the actual content of right and wrong, ethics refers to the process of identifying what is wrong and what is right. The key terms that differentiate morality and ethics are moral knowledge and moral reasoning. Ethics could be considered both as an art and science (Scott B Rae, 2009:5).

Ethics involves making decisions that can be justified to another person—not just to the brand. It is the basis for the first principle. This is what Bok would call public justification in his book, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Sissela Bok, 1999: 97-98). Essentially, the test of publicity involves being capable of justifying to a reasonable audience that the communication has been ethical. From an organisation's standpoint, social media professionals should consider every social media post through the lens of how the public would make out the dealings. This consideration should be based on a commitment to protecting and sustaining relationships, not in reaching the bottom-line goals for a company.

Ethics will come into play at regular intervals irrespective of whether it is social media or otherwise. Ethics sometimes force social media teams to make momentous decisions, and other times coming out in the ostensibly typical interactions that happen when responding to various reactions over social media networking portals. Many decisions made on a day-to-day basis involve questions of right and wrong, some of which may have easy answers but are difficult to carry out. Ethics provide the basis on which you make those decisions. A key component to the basis for making ethical decisions in social media understands the goal and purpose of social media relationships.

In 2009, Brian Solis designed a social compass to help guide the ethical and determined practice of social media. Its first appearance was made in his book *Engage* and was inspired by a moral compass. Social compass serves as the value system when defining strategies, initiatives, and ultimately engagement. It points a brand in a physical and experimental direction to genuinely and effectively connect with customers, peers, and influences, where they interact and seek guidance online. (Brian Solis, 2011:210).

Over a time, ethics of journalism as accepted by members of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has been the major reference document to most of the media institutions across the world. However, academic engagement with social networking services vis-à-vis the media ethics needs something more than what is talked about in SPJ ethical guidelines.

Academic engagement with social networking services

The study of ethical implications of social networking sites can be considered a subpart of computer and information ethics. According to George W Reynolds, ethical behaviour obeys to generally accepted norms while considering ethics as a set of beliefs about right and wrong behaviours within a society (George W Reynolds, 2015: 3-4).

It is true that computer and information ethics indeed accommodate an interdisciplinary approach. Nevertheless, the direction and problems of that field have largely been defined by philosophically-trained scholars. Hitherto this has not been the early array for the ethics of social networking. Relatively due to the time-based happenstance of the social networking phenomenon with evolving empirical studies of the patterns of use and effects of computer-mediated-communication (CMC), a field now called Internet Studies (Robert Burnett et al., 2011:3).

Initially, the ethical implications of social networking technologies were targeted for an inquiry by a combination of ethnographers, political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, anthropologists, and of course, media scholars. However, over some time, certain issues concerning social networking issues on ethics have cropped up; whether to deal ethics of social networking services separately as a disconnected subject or to continue to pursue inquiries

independently as it has been happening. Links between those researches and studies in other disciplinary contexts continue to be highly significant, while this entry will for the most part confine itself to reviewing existing philosophical research on social networking ethics.

Social media ethics

A host of ethical questions confront organisations that use social media. Some of these questions are significant and others that may seem rather trivial. Social media strategies need to be able to make out areas of ethical concern and apply an ethical scaffold to social media management to best serve their organisations and the social media community. In his foreword to the book, *Ethical Practices of Social Media in Public Relations*, Brian Solis explains the concept like this:

"At its very core, social media is not about technology, it's about people. Connections, emotions, expression become the souls and personalities of online communities. The ties that bind them together are relationships. Without value, mutual benefits, the quality of the relationship erodes." (Marcia W Distaso and Denise Sevick Bortree 2014: xv)

A core obligation to the safety of the relationships developed in social media should be a prime consideration for ethics by organisations within social spaces. According to many communication scholars, usage of the Ethics of Care principles in social media could accomplish this commitment to relationships and ethics. It is helpful to examine historical approaches to relationship building and theories that would apply to social media, to create an ethical schema for social media professionals.

Four models were proposed by Grunig and Hunt in 1984, for how the public relations process, or the act building mutually beneficial relationships, has been exercised all through history. According to them, a two-way symmetrical model is the best approach, as it uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or win over publics (Carolyn Mae Kin 2016:81). In the symmetrical model, understanding is the principal objective of public relations rather than persuasion

(James E Grunig 1992: 289). The idea of mutual understanding and communication fits perfectly into the core purpose of social media.

As mentioned in the book, The ethics of emerging media: informative, social norms and new media technology, Baker and Martinson suggest that five principles can help guide communication efforts. These are truthfulness of the message, authenticity of the organisation, respect for the people being communicated with, equity of the message, and social responsibility (Bruce E Drushel and Nathleen German 2011:215). The same is popularly known as the TARES ethical model. The TARES model, being discussed in the ensuing session, is the recommended model for the formulation of the set of ethical guidelines for both students of media as well as social media practitioners.

The TARES ethical model

The TARES ethical model suggests that media professionals act with integrity when they are transparent, truthful, respectful and authentic with those they communicate with by disclosing payments and gifts they received. Fig.1 below gives the impression of five principles for ethical persuasion in TARES ethical model.

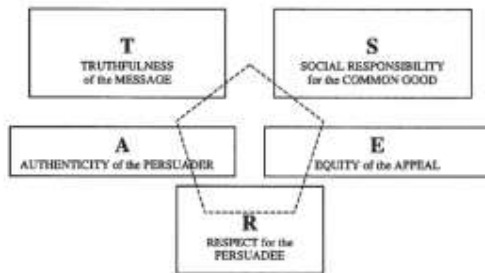


Fig 1. Five principles of ethical persuasion in the TARES test
(Source: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/nU29-C5T4Pk/maxresdefault.jpg>)

The comprehensive discussion about the following five principles of ethical persuasion involved in the TARES test is dealt with in the following paragraphs.

- ◆ Truthfulness of the message;
- ◆ Authenticity of the organisation;
- ◆ Respect for the people being communicated with;
- ◆ Equity of the message; and
- ◆ Social responsibility.

Truthfulness of the message

The concept of truthfulness within the TARES test integrates a broad approach to precise information. Mutual trust is the foundation of relationships. When it is spoiled, the value of the relationship is weakened. Conviction is a social good to be protected. In other words, truthfulness in the TARES test is beyond simply sharing literal truth and goes to the heart of the idea of trust. It should be ensured that the information being provided should give transparent content, allowing individuals to make clued-up decisions. To further define what transparent messages would include, Rawlins suggests that transparent means the deliberate attempt to make all releasable information irrespective of whether the information is either positive or negative. However, to enhance the reasoning ability of the concerned, the information should be accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal (Christopher G Reddick 2010: 266).

For communication in social media to pass the truthful principle in TARES, it must not only be accurate but also transparent, providing complete information that is capable of allowing the publics to make the most informed decision and choice possible, rather than attempting to hide, remove, or limit the information that may be less than positive for organisations.

Wie Bok suggested that when information is intentionally left out of communication with the public, it would just turn into a harmful act - similar to the violence that acts against the public and prevents them from adequately understanding the threat thus imposed. Besides, it would also prevent the public to embrace possible alternatives (G Lee Bowie et.al 1997: 314).

Given the above, truthful communication is far and above than just positioning messages that are accurate into the social media. It involves providing complete and transparent information that gives audiences all the information available to make an informed decision.

Authenticity

An organisation requires that there is a commitment to personal responsibility and a deep concern for the value of others - the written authenticity of the communication. In other words, it requires persuaders to evaluate the motivation, intentions and attitudes to drive convincing activities to act virtuously (Baker and Martinson 2001:162-170).

Additionally, when interacting in relationships, the concept of authenticity requires genuineness and sincerity. It is important to position the brand appropriately and engage in social media around topics of mutual interest, but this must come from a communication virtue that focuses on the genuine belief that the organisation makes a positive contribution to the online community. While social media teams sternly represent the organisations that they serve, they also have a deep commitment and dedication to the good of their online communities. Balancing the needs of the organisation with the needs of the online community is part of being authentic.

Respect

This principle requires that the communication and actions through social media should emphasise that the brand recognises each community member as worthy of dignity. Also, that they do not violate their rights, interests, and well-being for raw self-interest or purely client-serving purposes. In other words, it should be clear that the people with whom the organisation has relationships are amazingly valuable, simply because they are real people.

Jaksa and Pritchard argue that people should not be treated merely as a means to an end; they are to be respected as ends in themselves. Human beings are beyond price (Ibid). This principle is the basis for the TARES model as it is the motivation that informs the other ideologies-the inherent dignity and value of each person.

Equity

All parties involved in communication will be treated fairly is what the concept of equity means. The idea is to consider the other individual and identify whether they are being taken advantage of or being compelled due to the form of communication. The goal is that the interests of some are not sacrificed to the arbitrary advantages held by others (Ibid), such as organisations who hold a great deal of power using propaganda on social media to take advantage of a situation. Each time a strategy or tactic is designed for social media, consider whether the prime audience of the strategy or ploy is being approached with equity being given not only accurate and truthful information but the information presented in a legitimate way that is free of bullying, scare-tactics and sensationalism.

Social responsibility

Organisations have a duty to the good of society at large is the concept behind the social responsibility precept. This means that organisations cannot ethically be promoting causes, services, products or even what harms the common good as that would not meet the TARES test.

The TARES model is composed of interrelated moral safeguards with principles that are mutually supporting and validating (Ibid). As social media professionals attempt to design strategic campaigns, each post, tactic, strategy, and objective must be reviewed through an ethical lens to protect the well-being of the relationships within social media and, ultimately, the good of each person in the social media community. Ethical decisions should be informed by remembering the core purpose of social media: to engage in conversations with real people who have far-fetched value just by being human.

While scholarship in the social and natural sciences has tended to focus on the impact of Social Networking Services (SNS) on psychosocial markers of happiness/comfort, psychosocial adjustment, social capital, or feelings of life satisfaction, philosophical concerns about social networking and ethics have generally focussed on topics less acquiescent to empirical measurement. For example, friendship, privacy, identity, good life and democratic freedom. More

so than 'social capital' or feelings of 'life satisfaction,' these topics are closely tied to traditional concerns of ethical theory like virtues, rights, duties, motivations and consequences. These topics are also tightly linked to the novel features and distinctive functionalities of SNS, more so than some other issues of interest in computer and information ethics that relate to more general Internet functionalities like issues of copyright and intellectual property.

Recommendation

The aforementioned TARES Ethical Model might be wisely utilised to examine the existing set of Ethics of Journalism for its extension to validate the ethics for the media of recent origin-social media that deviates the conventional mainstream media in many aspects. As discussed previously, the TARES ethical model suggests that media professionals act with integrity when they are transparent, truthful, respectful and authentic with those they communicate. The same becomes the basis for the formulation of guidelines to meet the need for revisiting the ethics of journalism in the digital era for its revival.

Conclusion

The history of media education in India began in 1920. Since there have been many changes in media technologies and the consumption patterns of the media content by the masses. Ethics of journalism and media communication is one of the topics of both academic importance and professional practices. However, due to the non-contemplation of the existing set of guidelines that are adopted almost all over the world, there is an urgent need to revise and resuscitate the existing guidelines. Ethics of social media lie at the root of the notion that social media is not about the exploitation of technology but service to society—a typical new way of social service.

As recommended in this paper, the TARES ethical model might be taken into consideration to formulate an extended set of ethics of journalism to validate the ethics for the new media.

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