

The Significance of Truth in Media Ethics and Its Precise Comprehension in Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Truth is the cornerstone of media ethics, and every media professional must understand its proper application and deeper meaning. The media has frequently faced allegations of falsehood, bias, and scandal in reporting. Despite journalists' commitment to accuracy and truth, there remains a risk of misrepresenting the public, particularly in political and democratic contexts. Therefore, journalists must cultivate truth-seeking qualities such as accuracy, diligence, and thoroughness. Ethical journalism also demands higher virtues—impartiality to avoid ideological distortion, humility to acknowledge limitations, and moral courage to resist political or commercial pressure.

While factual accuracy and objectivity are essential, journalists must also exercise restraint in disclosing information that may harm the nation, society, or social harmony. A central aim of media ethics is to minimize harm during reporting, which requires an understanding of truth as a complete and balanced concept rather than a partial or selective one. In this regard, adopting M. K. Gandhi's conception of truth—guided by one's inner voice or conscience—can strengthen ethical journalistic practice. By aligning factual truth with moral sensitivity, journalists can contribute to responsible public discourse and social well-being.

Keywords: Factual accuracy, Inner voice, Media ethics, Truth

1. INTRODUCTION

Media ethics is the subdivision of applied ethics that covers all forms of media. All types of media such as broadcast media, television, radio, newspapers, journals, online media and magazines etc. operate with certain principles and standards. It is generally accepted that any media professional, such as a correspondent, commentator and newscaster should always seek the truth and report the truth. The policy of truth is very important in media ethics because the public relies on it for 'true news'. The public relies on the media to get daily information about what is happening in their city, country and worldwide. Journalism with truthfulness means that journalists take special care not to misrepresent the real situation by fabricating stories for readers or viewers. Reporting truthfully is essential for a journalist to earn respect and trust from their audience.

Not just in media ethics, truth has held a significant position in both Indian and Western traditions since ancient times. In Indian ethics especially in Jain and Buddha ethics we find the primacy of truth. In Jainism Truth (Satya Mahābrata) is one of the five Mahābratas.

The fourth of the five precepts (Pañca-sīla) of Buddhism is abstaining from false speech. Here false speech encompasses lying, divisive speech, abusive language and idle talk that distort the truth and foster discrimination. Therefore, in Buddhism the importance on right speech is

emphasized. The Buddhist teaching on right speech clearly states that right speech in the right way will lead one to the truth. Through right speech one can build healthy relationship through trust and harmony.

Throughout Western tradition we find the concept of truth has many definitions and interpretations. The ancient Greeks associated truth with memory. Plato was the first person who associated truth with logic and reasoning. According to Plato, Truth is known only by the human intellect; it cannot be touched and cannot be verified by experience. Medieval theologians believed that truth is revealed only by God or the Church.

John Milton suggested that competing conceptions of truth should be allowed to coexist, until the ultimate truth finally emerges. Modern journalism borrows its concept of truth from Milton's doctrine of truth

In the examination of truth, we encounter three classical theories of truth: (1) the correspondence theory of truth, (2) the coherence theory of truth and (3) the pragmatic theory of truth. The correspondence theory, states that truth is correspondence to fact. A proposition is considered true if it is consistent with fact. According to the coherence theory, truth is the consistency of propositions with each other, and when a group of propositions support each other, it is called coherence. In fact, it is the clear and consistent way things fit together that makes a big, meaningful whole. Based on the pragmatic theory, truth is defined by what is effective.

Three significant individuals are linked to this theory of truth: - Charles Sanders Peirce, who founded the theory; John Dewey, who expanded and improved it; and William James, who popularized the theory. William James posited that a judgment is considered true if it is effective in practice and results in favorable outcomes.

In addition to these, there exists a variety of other truth theories, including(1) the semantic theory, which emphasizes the logical and linguistic elements of truth, particularly regarding formal languages; (2) the pluralist theory, which posits that various kinds of assertions can be considered true through different methods, that could include correspondence, coherence, or other approaches;(3) the epistemic theories, which examine the connection between truth and knowledge, investigating the processes by which we understand what truth is and ; (4) the consensus theory of truth, which asserts that truth is defined by what is accepted as true by everyone.

Since journalists operate differently than scientists, there is not an epistemological method that can validate their work. Journalists therefore value different accounts of the truth and recognize that their informed opinions do not claim to be the ultimate truth. Since Stephen J. A. Ward in his book “Ethics and the Media: An Introduction” mentioned: *“We constantly reinterpret and balance principles so as to respond to new problems, new facts, new technology, new social conditions. Even the boundaries of ethics change.”*¹

It is said that when new information is available, news is made based on the truth of that information That is, if the information is proved to be true, the news is published based on the information. For journalists, truth depends not only on scientific facts, but also on subjective agreement. Journalists act as critical arbiters of truth. Journalists contribute to sharing a common epistemology of rationality and reality. They uncover truth from data bases by applying methods of personalization and reasoning. This relationship of truth with journalism plays a special role in preventing the spread of fake news. Journalists in journalism must be honest and courageous in reporting, interpreting and gathering information to disseminate true news.

The article highlights the importance of truth in journalism and the obstacles journalists face in conveying the truth. Additionally, it emphasizes to uncover the authentic meaning of truth and the way of its application in journalism.

The Connotation of Truth in Journalism

Truth plays an important role as a moral norm in media ethics; just as truth-telling is a moral norm in almost all cultures. If the persons involved in journalism tell lies as opposed to telling the truth, it is considered cheating the public. A good responsible journalist should always tell the truth and try to minimize the damage as much as possible.

Truthfulness is considered a universal principle of journalism as journalism is an important pillar of democracy and acts as the voice of the people. Journalism is about finding the right facts to stop the spread of false information, and in that sense being right is always more

important than being first. In journalism, special care is taken to identify information received from others before a news broadcast and one must have a clear idea of the source from which the information has been collected without relying on one’s own assumptions. Before reporting on an individual or community, journalists must gather enough accurate information to accurately follow the full story.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), established in 1922 as a non-profit professional association, concentrates on issues related to journalism and adheres strictly to the principle of truthfulness. The ethical code set forth by ASNE for professional journalists emphasizes the importance of seeking and reporting the truth. Members associated with this organization believe that all media and responsible journalists must serve the public diligently, and it is the responsibility of journalists to provide an impartial and thorough account of events and issues by pursuing the truth and promoting these objectives. Article VI of ASNE's Statement of Principles, created in 1996, highlights the significance of accuracy in news reporting. ASNE's principles were first introduced in 1922 as the "Canons of Journalism" and were later revised in 1975, resulting in the current title of "Statement of Principles."

In 2011, the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) was established as a global alliance of media professionals, journalists, editors, and press freedom advocates. Promoting high ethical standards in the media is the EJN's objective. The core tenet of journalism, according to the EJN ideals, is to always strive for accuracy and report the truth. It stated that the material gathered should be carefully examined for veracity before being made public.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), world’s largest organization of journalists, founded in 1926 and reformed in 1946. Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists was adopted by IFJ on 12 June 2019 at the 30th World Congress in Tunis, which consists of 16 articles along with a preamble. It outlines the moral responsibilities of journalists. IFJ states that honoring the public’s right to access information and the truth is a fundamental duty of journalists. It underscores truthful reporting, equitable techniques for information collection and prompt rectification of mistakes. In fact, it promotes ethical journalism that prioritizes factual accuracy. It asserts that journalists should strive to protect the principles of truthfulness and freedom of expression. They must cover only information from sources they are familiar with, guaranteeing the credibility of their content.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), recognized as the primary union and professional organization for journalists in Australia, holds a crucial place in the realm of journalism ethics. It serves as the guardian of the journalists’ code of ethics that was initially established in 1944 and updated in 1999. The MEAA Code of Ethics defines the professional standards and obligations of journalists. It emphasizes the importance of reporting in a truthful, fair, and accurate manner. The Code asserts that journalists must provide precise information and strive to publish all essential information that is both accurate and equitable.

In a similar vein, various Journalist Associations in India have established a code of conduct for journalists. This ethical framework highlights that journalists have a responsibility to serve the public interest by upholding the truth. In other words, their obligation is to report accurately and to verify the truthfulness of all gathered information. The Press Council of India has developed an ethical code for journalism referred to as the “Norms of Journalistic Conduct,” which emphasizes the importance of accuracy and impartiality.

It can therefore be asserted that the principle of truthfulness in journalism is upheld by journalists across the globe, as this is a shared ethical guideline in the field. To ensure precision and impartiality in news reporting, journalists must diligently avoid intentionally misrepresenting visual and other contextual information. Journalists should actively seek the truth in their reporting. They have a responsibility to relay as much accurate information as possible to the public, as citizens are entitled to know accurate reporting. It is vital for journalists to work autonomously to uncover the truth and preserve the public's trust.

Challenges of Journalists for Presenting the Truth

The media repeatedly faces accusations of scandals, inaccuracies, and bias in its coverage. This occurs because, to start, journalists are blamed for undermining our democracy and, second, they are charged with sacrificing the truth. This accusation is neither recent nor unexpected; although numerous journalists assert that they contribute significantly to fostering an informed, engaged citizenry. As Nick Davies stated: *“I am afraid to say there are some cynical liars in our profession but most journalists are not”*²

While journalists profess to pursue the truth and provide accurate reports, they cannot escape the obligation of possibly misrepresenting the public regarding politics and democratic institutions. They face significant criticism when they are complacent, biased, or, more worryingly, deliberately misleading.

Moreover, critics of journalism often overlook that journalists believe they can chase civic virtue and intellectual integrity simultaneously; they strive for both, yet frequently accomplish neither.

The problem with real data collection is that there is no necessary connection between real data and citizens' concerns or willingness to engage with an issue. Sometimes a sensational report on the growth of certain ethnic minorities, or a biased report on the environmental record of a large corporation, can have more effect in misleading citizens than broadcasting the truth. Therefore, to act as a catalyst, a journalist must be careful not to be tempted to distort information for maximum effect. It can be said that not dressing up in the noble love of democracy in journalism is gross contempt for the truth.

There are social, economic, and political reasons that would compel a reporter, editor, or publisher to stoop to falsehood. For example, a newspaper may prioritize sales and publicity over truth or political affiliation over truth.

Moreover, journalists encounter numerous limitations on the battlefield that hinder their capacity to report freely

and they must only disseminate the official narrative. Journalists find themselves in a state of epistemological ambiguity. Consequently, they confront various challenges in their quest for truth. No wonder there are so many journalists who risk their lives to tell the truth.

Ways for Journalists to Convey the Truth

A more compelling approach is needed to ensure that the central ethical principle of truth-telling in journalism is not compromised by other principles. It is equally important to build a strong foundation for truth-seeking in journalism that relies on accurate amounts of truth, not guesswork. A journalist cannot claim to know something in the truest sense, unless it is supported by factual evidence. However, what journalists report must be based on factual knowledge, even if those reports are very direct, very immediate. Fact-finding in journalism is the separation of fact from fiction and rumor.

Journalism often fails to capture truth or knowledge. It is important for journalists to adopt truth-seeking qualities so that journalism does not fail to achieve truth or knowledge as this is a prerequisite for trust between journalists and their audience. Journalists often make allowances for themselves by reporting misinformation, exaggeration and even bias to the public, but the public will not tolerate being deceived by a journalist who himself reports what they do not believe. Since people trust them, they should respect public trust by reporting the truth. That's why it is very important to acquire truth-seeking qualities. Truth-seeking qualities must include qualities of caution such as accuracy, diligence, and thoroughness. Even these qualities are not enough. Therefore, true conscientiousness in the pursuit of truth demands higher virtues, such as impartiality, humility, courage, and a willingness to follow where these virtues lead. In truth-seeking journalism, journalists must take special care to avoid misrepresenting or oversimplifying, previewing, or summarizing an event.

Truth-seeking in journalism requires rejection of narrow and biased perspectives. If journalists fail to provide a balanced view then the truth in their reporting remains unknown and the reporting becomes controversial. In short, biased opinions will result in unethical reporting. Just as some politicians routinely ignore minorities and the marginalized, if journalists do the same, the truth will remain unknown. When there is a rivalry between the two main political parties, journalists have to remain neutral in order to reveal the truth to the public.

Although journalists must confront daily pressures to discover the truth, limitations on collecting information, and the competing actions of rival media organizations, they must take responsibility for the accuracy of their work, as *“journalists have a social responsibility to work ultimately in the interest of the public”*³. So, they must check information carefully before publishing it and use original sources whenever possible. Neither speed nor format is an excuse for error in journalism. To give weight to the truth, a news report must gather all the available information properly.

Journalists must quickly learn some methods of reporting true news, that is, they must become short-term scholars. The qualities that journalists need to acquire in order to

broadcast the truth as accurately as possible within a limited time frame are intellectual humility, impartiality and the courage to report accurately. Journalists should remember that their reports must be of the best quality and must be disseminated through vetting procedures. That is, the news should be well researched before spreading the truth.

However, it is one of the important norm of media ethics is to reveal the truth without doing any harm. Many times a lot of damage is done by reporting some incidents. It is usually seen that while Journalists' reporting contains false information and exaggerations that change the lives of the wrongly accused. Over and above sometimes accurately representing actual events can result in social unrest. For instance, when a specific issue like a land dispute leads to hostility between individuals from two different communities, they may end up attacking and harming one another. When journalists report on such violent incidents, it has been observed that this coverage frequently escalates into communal riots. Therefore, it is essential to refrain from revealing the truth in a manner that can jeopardize societal harmony. Moreover, when the disclosure of a particular truth proves harmful to the country and the nation, one should refrain from disclosing that truth for the good of the country and the nation. In fact, truth in the true sense can never bring harmful consequences. So, a good journalist should always tell the truth while reporting a story but try to minimize the damage as much as possible. It can also be argued that accurate information should be conveyed to the public in a manner that is not provocative. Above all, reporters need to be particularly cautious not to disclose information to the public that could be detrimental to the country, nation or society and might disturb social harmony.

Findings and Conclusions

Journalists empower people to make decisions so they can actively participate in the democratic process. In this way, journalists build an informed citizenry through their work.

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Journalists investigate various issues of public interest such as human rights violations, anti-social activities etc. and present these to the public and play a watchdog role. If journalists do not respect truthfulness, they cannot build a healthy society and fail to play an important role for society. Journalists cover various issues to act as a bridge between an event and people and to bring the truth to the public. Given that truth is a crucial standard of journalistic ethics, journalists must collect sufficient accurate information before reporting on individuals and communities to capture the complete narrative. A journalist's work should rely on factual evidence and be devoid of limited and biased viewpoints. Journalists should embody truth-seeking traits, including precision, hard work and comprehensiveness. Furthermore, some elevated qualities are necessary such as fairness, modesty and bravery.

It should be noted that Journalists must pay special attention not revealing to the public facts that are harmful to the country, nation or society and that may disrupt social peace. Since another important aspect of media ethics is minimizing harm when reporting a story. While defining truth M.K. Gandhi said: "...it is what the voice within tells you".⁴

Moreover, Gandhi said that truth can only be realized by those who possess a deep sense of humility

In this context, journalists ought to embrace the path to truth outlined by Gandhi and comprehend truth in its entirety and authentic form, giving it precedence over any specific facet of truth. As is said in Jainism:

*"It becomes fallacious when particulars alone are viewed as real and universals are rejected as unreal, ..."*⁵

To conclude, it can be stated that since truth is central aspect of media ethics it is vital for every journalist to grasp the true meaning of truth and to implement it properly...

Gandhi's Thoughts, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Mudranalaya, May 1966. p. 42.

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