

Social Responsibility: A Critical analysis of the role of Media in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The essence of democracy lies in the extent to which the citizens of that country freely exercise their fundamental rights. One among such rights is the freedom of expression and speech. With the advent of mass communication and the shared information platforms across the globe, the world has shrunk to a tiny little space and we all have turned public properties where individual privacy has become the old-fashioned affair. With this background in mind where we live in a shared world with others in a constant gaze (verbal or otherwise) how far we can talk of subjectivity, privacy, and ethics. This paper is an attempt to see through the social responsibility of the media which is a mass medium of communication and shared worldviews, how far it is ethical? Especially when we talk of the context of Indian media houses - which have created multiple narratives through the exercise of power and politics, how far we can claim the 'truth' and facticity in the information shared in media platforms. When we talk of media -it covers all the platforms where the information is shared for the masses and privacy and ethics seems to be written keeping in mind the business rather than ethics per se. Hence, in light above analogies, this paper tries to critically question the fundamental aspect of media ethics more specifically of Indian media. The methodology of the paper is critical and analytical. As the nature of the paper is analytical, it is going to be a problem-centric analysis rather than any futuristic and solution-seeking approach. Maybe in due course of analysis, some alternatives might evolve, but my caution is to restrict only for the sake of argument and not to be treated as a solution of the larger context.

Keywords

Ethics of responsibility, Privacy, Subjectivity, Truth

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Human beings are social beings and communication is the medium/tool through which this social nature of human beings is being explored. Most of the problems in the world are been stated to prevailed due to miscommunication than communication. In the opinion of logical positivism - the twentieth-century philosophical school of thought - chose to analyze language for the solution of the philosophical problems - most of the problems in philosophy are linguistic problems and arise due to the misuse of language. Hence the aim of philosophical analysis in the twentieth century was to analyze language and the human mind. On the other hand, in Continental tradition Emmanuel Levinas holds, "All men worthy of the name are responsible for each other. I always have, myself, one responsibility more than anyone else, since I am responsible, in addition, for his responsibility. And if he is responsible for my responsibility, I remain responsible for the responsibility he has for my responsibility." In all approaches, thinkers of all ages gave reference to three central themes – thought/ideas language and linguistic analysis. More so the meta-ethical question of the responsibility of media which reaches the mass (of all strata of society through several mediums of communication and socialize) has a greater role to play if we aim to be democratic and fair in terms of Sate and wish to continue living in civil society.

The sole responsibility of media is to help strengthen and endure the process of democracy. It serves as a protector of the rights and it must provide correct information to the mass. The media is expected to be responsible for what and how it reports, and democratic in providing information retaining its onlooker status. With the constant deterioration of traditional (cultural/religious) values in society over the ages, there is an urgent need also to reaffirm and evaluate the fundamental constituent/s of media ethics. The reason for highlighting this specific point here is to reaffirm and justify(at the same time) the necessity and significance of mass media platforms in shaping the cultural ethos of the country or the state. The role of media in making people aware of the constantly evolved values in twenty-first-century society (both physical and virtual) and projected as global citizens have been possible only through social media exposure. Adoption of values and tradition by the plural society has always been subtle and effortless and media has been pivotal in disseminating the narrative to the mass. For instance, in India past so many decades, television serials and movies centrally gave exposure to the traditional value systems and traditions – be it idealistic or otherwise. However, the outcome of it was for good or bad is another issue to deal with altogether. Media ethics by and large at present intensely approaches the issues of autonomy, freedom, and privacy. Understanding media (in any form) as phenomena in the twenty-first century is even more essential – as it

justifies our 'being-in-the-world²- within the given contexts of human experiences more so in the post-covid world. We not only live but we live in a public domain with others where we are constantly under the 'gaze' of the other. This gaze from other who is remotely connected to me not only encounters but it passes my private world to the mass. Being a socio-communicative being (of a globe) is inevitable in today's world. Hence is an urgent necessity to give a glance to what is already displayed (irrespective of its truth or falsity) and any future ventures to the world of phenomena in the form of media and revisit it through a different dimension of ethics to generate a different meaning altogether. I have taken up to venture it through phenomenological interpretation by of social responsibility of media and in doing so attempted to reaffirm the fundamental ontology of media – being responsible towards other/s.

By the end of the last decade, the nature of the current topic of analysis has gradually attracted almost all the disciplines but in itself remains a divisive and often enigmatic contributor to its domain. When we intend to unite media not only as a medium but as an evolving body of information – then the question of ethical responsiveness, it may seem- apparently diverse applications of lived dimensions and in doing so when we consider the challenge of media in maintaining the socio-ethical relationship with the mass - we possibly can reconsider the ethics of responsibility - as a clue to our investigation. Tracking the idea of the media as the social body of responsibility -is complicated by the fact that it is co-emergent, although not co-extensive, with other important themes. Urgent need to the practical demands involved in recognizing responsibility for the participants (stakeholders) during the transmission and the transition of maintaining the ethical relationship with the people who are at the other side of the fence - and then invested the responsibility back to itself for its subsistence and rigor - to the extent that the ethical relation entails the interruption of alterity - the potential of the unsettling established order, moral or otherwise. However, within the domains of politics, freedom, and conflict of co-existence – media not only serves its purpose but also in the fear of losing popularity - manipulates and produces alternative narratives and offers to the mass as truth. That is the first instance where the hammering question of social responsibility can be asked.

Social Responsibility - Social-ness of virtual media vis-à-vis Privacy

Communication begins at the outset of the social relationship. It is considered as a system of interaction in which meaning is derived from the definite structures of knowledge tradition (case) which is very much vulnerable – which takes a drastically violent shape when this vulnerability meets with meaning and is attached with a description through a narrative of communication. The problem may or may not

appear not at the surface level. But the moment of passing of the information is the ethical moment for the medium to question the narrative in communication. If any media fails to understand this moment of responsibility – it already lost its ethics. This scene is common in media especially with the advent of social media where everything is described and constructed through a preexisting body of knowledge. It is subtle violence or murder of authenticity and truth. Human beings are by nature social animals and more precisely small group animals. We feel the need for intimate relationships and to be with others. This idea of our social nature is the foundational access to the contemporary dynamic of market-driven economies and virtual social theories. One can even claim that the social unconscious precedes the emergence of the individual consciousness where there is no freedom of choice. In totality, it seems like freedom of choice but we as individuals are bound the see not what we wish to encounter but what has been thrown to us in and through these platforms.

In exploring the context of present-day media and its issues one pertinent question that comes into everyone one's mind is - the media landscape in the present context is seriously affected by the created meaning of politics and power which can lead to the construction of a totalitarian society. The aim of which is to construct only one narrative and be intolerant towards other alternative voices. In recent times, there has been a common concern amongst the users of social media about their privacy. Incidents of data breaching have alarmed many users and forced them to rethink their relationships to social media and the security of their personal information. More specifically post covid situation across the globe, when the whole world is connected only through virtual social media platforms, the privacy concerns also have increased exponentially past two years in the form of data-stealing, sharing malware, and helping cybercriminals to hack into personal user accounts and gain personal information. A person who is well versed in technology is being cheated then we can imagine the situation of the average citizen who is not an expert in using these platforms. However, there is also another danger, more alarming through these media platforms - it sees the dangers of uncontrolled, individual freedom, and puts itself forth as the only rational answer to anarchy. To be free is the same as to be rational, and to be rational is to give oneself over to the total system that is developing in world history. Since the essential self is also rational, the development of this system will coincide with the interests of the self. All otherness will be absorbed in this total system of harmony and order.

Communicative Media and Narrative construction

The liberalism and democracy as well as his revolutionary conception of human life as deeply interconnected on philosophical, political, and religious grounds

which in return try to analyze some of the core issues of media ethics. One such foundational element which needs attention at the present context – more specifically in the Indian news and social media has been the creation of a certain narrative and make it popular amongst the mass and make it a movement for the fulfillment of some vested interest (which may or may not serve the larger interest of the people of the country). The narrative structure is mainly seen as a structural framework of the literary element that puts forth the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to a reader, listener, or viewer. The narrative of the media tries to structure the plot and the setting rather than ‘what is the case which is being presented for the information of the public.

A narrative is basically a story and, in any story, there are characters and there is always an end to the story which is a choice of the storyteller. Usually, a piece of narrative is a personal anecdote or experiential data, and it follows the same pattern as all fiction. Its three elements are exposition or giving a piece of background information to contextualize the plot, followed by events, entanglements of complications, and the emergence of narratives in the process, and at last the culmination of the story. In today’s social media more especially in News media - the actual reporting of happening in the society with the facts and figures are supposed to be given whereas the narrative is not bound to address facts and figures. A narrative is a story that has a beginning, eventful chapters, and end. unlike news which is more focused on the present condition of that story and may continue to eternity. Because information cannot be justification in itself as it is supposed to address ‘what is the case’ than ‘what it ought to be the case.

Another significant yet unanalyzed ethical issue with social media and its responsiveness lies in the access to media tools like WhatsApp, Twitter, and any other short video creation and content creation platforms like YouTube Instagram, Snapchat, etc. have quickly become hobbies cum income sources, especially during the pandemic for the people across the globe. A decent smartphone with a camera, and these online applications on which one can capture, edit and share his/her content — have become a demographic game changer for the media market. For instance, many popular faces and personalities from entertainment and news media joined these platforms which gave a boost to the popularity of their usage amongst the lower middle class and middle class in India. The explosion of internet connectivity and cheap smartphones in small towns and rural India, leading to the growth of the number of online users on these social media. This type of coming together of the communications created a mass revolution and gave birth to a neo-middle class. This has also led to the evolving of a strange narrative where instead of being human and

using human capacities people choose to shot video rather than helping people in crises. For instance, natural and man-made evils, like fire, mob lynching, or even rape, we choose to shoot a video first than to be a helping hand in person. The widespread emergence of multiple media platforms including social media is redefining the role of the media in politics and government, and the relationship between the two. Hence, in the given context when the media house starts setting up the narrative than the truth – the factuality takes a back seat then and there itself. In online mass media such as - commercial pressures (in terms of TRPS, accuracy, and credibility which aims at which I prefer to call totalizing the narrative.

Here totalization of the expression which can be seen as a threat to democracy - is a matter of relating to the privacy, safety, and truth of the matter - in a way that tries always to overpower or “functionalize” for some personal gain. Concretely, it is a matter of “consumption”—of cannibalism with varying degrees of brutality (always in some way reducing the other to nourishment, sustenance) - paralyzing the context in consideration. This can also take the form of “use,” of making the other somehow subservient to the market-driven project of the existence of the media (reducing the other to an instrument be it a situation or the people involved in the given framework). Money is one “interesting” means to do this – showcasing the power through bargain and sell. Money permits the ego to accumulate possessions and becomes rich, this also consolidating and expanding its independence. Money is thus not so much a ready tool for the establishment and development of one’s freedom, capacities, and wealth—all with an eye not merely to itself - but rather a nearly almighty instrument of power capable of guaranteeing everything else. It is in that sense that money is a form of practical totalization, and thus of violence toward others. The availability of money makes it possible to influence others and even to lay hold of them. Today’s world of approaching and displaying the power has been confined within - who have money - think nothing at all of buying and selling others, because we are very tempted by the freedom and power which goes with money, or which it promises. The tyranny and cruelty of money are familiar enough in today’s world of media when everything is constructed.

Within the domains of social responsibility of media; I see multiple scopes to reformulate the grounds on which media ethics is based. The essence of media lies in addressing the fact/truth to the otheri. e. to the mass. It aims at global human flourishing, a comprehensive and composite good but at the same time, it goes beyond nation based principles of egalitarian liberalism, dialogical democracy, and principled pluralism - develops our notions from a global perspective. Whenever egocentric reason approaches persons and things, it inevitably reduces them to a moment of the

ego and the same, and the result is not only intellectual reduction of reality to ontological totalization but also political reduction of persons and communities into totalized labels without a face - in considering the treatment of the media in content creation, displaying, and forwarding then it is the right time to question the ethical status of media. By ethics, I here mean the 'fundamental ontological status of media which inherently built to be ethical in its meaning of being. Hence, ethical/ontological meaning or status of media lies in being responsible towards the other (who is at the other sides (in two extremes) of the line; i.e. the receiver and the object(subject but created as object).

Conclusion

In any democracy, media is considered to be the fourth pillar that supports all other affairs and tries to make people aware of the facticity of the entire system. With such a heavy load on its shoulders, if media is not ethically obligated towards the social nature of its responsiveness towards the mass it not only loses its essence but also the entire system will collapse. Democracy is for the people and by the people and if the stakeholders are peddled with falsity and misinformation the entire ecosystem with collapse and there will be nobody to blame. Hence, there may be two-fold broader responsibilities on the part of the citizens in a democracy – first, make media ethically obligatory to factuality, and secondly, every citizen needs to be equally aware and take up the responsibility of not to adulterate the truth for the selfish interest and both these aspects need further research and analysis.

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Footnotes

1. Simon Critchley, Robert Bernasconi (Eds.). (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P, 44.
2. In the Heideggerian sense of *dasein*'s being in the world with others.