



Media: autonomous or constrained?

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Abstract

In the world of journalism, it is hard to pinpoint the ethical and moral values. The question remains, "Is there any ethics in media at all?", "Who decides what to show or publish?", "Is media blamable or media practitioners?." And there seems no clear-cut answer to it. However, the discourse of media ethics explores and widens its area while applying some moral and ethical principles to resolve media issues.

One of such issues is the autonomy to decide the contents of media. My paper contends to unfold the different perspective of autonomy or restrictions in media for publishing any content. However, there is no apparent answer to this and the concept of autonomy seems ambiguous in journalism.

Keywords: autonomy, constraints, freedom, journalism, moral ethics

1. Introduction

Media, derived from the word "medium", becomes one of the most powerful source of information presented to us by individual, subjects or organization through some or other way. Media compiled of journalism, television, newspaper, magazines, radio, film, video, cable, internet, etc. are different in their ways of presenting information and entertainment while engaging with and affecting our beliefs and attitude. Despite being the prominent voice of influencing the society in a democratic state, media, nowadays is seen operating as a cynical industry. Matthew Kieran talked about this double image of journalism, he says.

"On the one hand journalism is an industry, a major player in the profit-seeking market economy, and journalists are merely workers in that industry, driven by the need to make a living. On the other hand journalism is a profession, a vocation founded on the ethical principles which direct and regulate the conduct of the practitioner [1]."

Every profession should have technical as well as moral excellence when they come into the sphere of social responsibility. In media, particularly journalism follow two basic moral codes of conduct i.e., to 'Seek the Truth and Report it' and 'Minimize Harm'. Although seeking and telling truth with minimization of harm should be ideal, but these two phenomena itself seems to be in conflict with each other, as sometimes telling truth can harm and offend people at large. Considering these moral codes, journalists take the decisions about media content. Nonetheless, the question revolves around the autonomy to decide the media content or having constraints to do so. There comes the question of Media being

ethical or unethical regarding their action and decision. According to John C. Merrill, media per say cannot be ethical or unethical, only the media practitioners can [2].

Also, before unfolding other arguments, question remains untangled at the baseline of 'Who's Autonomy?' As in media, Journalism is turning into an industry, are we looking at an individual media practitioner's autonomy or autonomy of media as whole. Argument shifts from an individual to an organization, likewise autonomy revolves around different viewpoints.

The issues related to actions of media practitioners seem to take many faces. However, this paper will be focused on the various arguments in support or against the practice of Autonomy of media and also to demolish this very question of autonomy in media. Since different positions related to the decision-making principle arisen, two significant among them were discussed by Carol Reuss who argued that 'Individual values of media people shapes their ethical decisions' and by David Gordon who responded that 'social, economical, political as well as technological forces impact severely on the ethical decisions' in their book "Controversies in Media Ethics" (1998) [1, 2, 6].

2. Autonomy

Autonomy is considered as a necessary condition of free journalism. Autonomy can have positive as well as negative approach. While on one hand, positive approach takes the ability to choose freely; negative, on other shows the absence of external influence and independence from the environment. As defined by Media ethicist Deni Elliott, "Autonomy means being able to choose freely without undue pressure or coercion

¹Kieran, Matthew; *Media Ethics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, page 3-4

²Gordon, A. David, John Michael Kittross, John C. Merrill, Carol Reuss, *Controversies in Media Ethics*, New York, Addison-Wesley Longman Educational Publishers, 1998, page 1

[3].” As mentioned by Boeyink and Borden, Elliot adhered that one being a journalist, cannot leave ones moral conscience at the newsroom door and claim to be ‘just following orders’ or ‘just doing their job’. He stressed on Autonomy as important condition for moral agency, thereby one has “...to retain the autonomy as moral agents, even though it constraints individual actions by the general responsibilities^[4]”

While working under social sphere, an agent has to be responsible and accountable as moral agent, this presumes the ability to understand the significance of one’s choices and can be held responsible for their action. As John C. Merrill put it, “Ethical concern leads the media person to seek the *Summon Bonum*, the highest good in professional practice, thereby heightening self-respect and public credibility and respect^[5]”. This statement projects the view that media person should follow their individual virtue while taking ethical decisions which can be based either on *instinct*, or *custom*, or *conscience*. These moral standards are deliberately chosen by individual, although they may rely to some extent on social expectations. Media being a social tool cannot be ethical in isolation.

It is being said that people seek freedom and autonomy in their profession to exercise their individual values. But in media, where journalism has been established as an industry, organization tend to work together in a particular direction set forth by the authorized people of organization, instead of considering particular individual’s value. When this autonomy regarding ethical decisions and media content get curtailed due to some pressure or external factors, some media people still have access to their personal autonomy to leave the organization. Thus Autonomy, even though compromised, still leaves autonomy to compromise it or not. Nevertheless, in the real scenario, even if media practitioners have autonomy to switch or leave the organization where individual autonomy is coerced, but leaving an organization is not always feasible for the media practitioner, as it will impact their monetary life. No matter how ethical a media person can be, but still he has to maintain a livelihood and security for which employment is a must. This leaves a question on autonomy.

Unlike other fields, in ethics, ‘an answer does not have to be ideal to be acceptable’. However, Kantian law of autonomy is one of the prominent approaches to public relations ethics. As penned by Thomas Bivins, Kantian law of autonomy refers to

“...the moral conscience of the decision makers and reminds them not to submit to undue pressure from other organizational functions. It also allows decision makers to act according to their moral duties without fear of harmful repercussions. Each decision makers should be allowed to express himself freely, and that expression should be

respected by the others involved in the decisions^[6].”

This view also involves the stakeholders with the agent and the moral action done. The Kantian view autonomy brings the reason as well as goodwill toward society. But this view obligate every person with that situation to act in similar manner, which becomes rigorous and leave no room for improvement.

Moreover, the media content to be aired or presented are not just in the hand of one individual, but it needs to be approved by the authority of the organization. Thus, autonomy is also based on the position a media practitioner hold in organization. If the person is editor-in-chief, she/he can add or deduct or cut off any news or media content. But if she/he is an ordinary reporter, she/he has to report the news as per the given instructions. Also, Despite all the facts in favor of individual values shaping the ethical decision and media content, individual autonomy cannot be easily accessed in television media or journalism, but only in print journalism. Thus, the individual autonomy seems to be only a case of ‘ought’ and not ‘is’.

Although, Carol Reuss supported the view that Individual values of media people shapes their ethical decisions, but he also considered that these individual values are rooted in different experiences like parents, childhood upbringing, religious and educational behaviour, journalistic and social experience, etc. This ambiguity leaves the question on the very concept of autonomy. As the autonomy is built out of social values, how autonomy can be called autonomy. Thus, to me, this notion of autonomy in shaping the media content seems baseless.

3. Constrains

Constraint is one of the moral excuses people or organization make to escape from responsibility and accountability. As put forth by Thomas Bivins, “Constraints refers to both physical imperatives and lack of alternatives^[7]”. Physical imperative is when a person is forced into doing something, whereas lack of alternatives is wherein one has not enough choice for consideration than what has been given.

According to David A. Gordon, Media content, although seems to be determined by the individual decision made by media practitioners, but is widely influenced by various social, political and economic forces in society. As believed, for journalism to be fair and true, Individual autonomy should be the case but in real experience, external forces and pressure shape the media contents. Gordon named Political, societal, economic and technological pressure as constraints which influence and shape media content.

Although different pressure and influence has been mentioned by Gordon as constraints, but so far as I believe, only political pressure can be taken as constraint or coercion. Social, Economical and Technological influences can be avoided by media as an organization through the autonomy they hold,

³ Boeyink, David E. and Sandra L. Borden; *Making Hard Choices in Journalism Ethics: Case and Practice*, New York and London, Routledge, 2010, page 4

⁴ Ibid, page 4

⁵ Gordon, A. David, John Michael Kittross, John C. Merrill, Carol Reuss, *Controversies in Media Ethics*, New York, Addison-Wesley Longman Educational Publishers, 1998, page 2

⁶ Bivins, Thomas; *Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, public Relations, and Journalism*, 2nd edition, New York and London, Routledge, 2009, page 164

⁷ Bivins, Thomas; *Mixed Media: Moral Distinctions in Advertising, public Relations, and Journalism*, 2nd edition, New York and London, Routledge, 2009, page 7

because there still remain some alternatives to be taken. Whereas Political or governmental pressure act as an external force on media content which cannot be overridden. The latest instance of political pressure in India was of the one-day ban on the transmission and re-transmission of NDTV India by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Despite having 'freedom of expression', this ban on broadcasting was made on 9th November 2016, on the matter of censorship of news related to Pathankot Terrorist attack in January. Thus, censorship is another kind of political pressure on media content. Government also regulates Internet content and Paid news in a way to influence ethical decisions and media content by imposing laws.

4. Conclusion

Moving from Individual autonomy to constraints is a gradual improvement from personal ethics to Professional ethics. According to Thomas Bivins, whenever there is an adoption of profession, one gets obligated to do job as per some professional ethics and thereby goes beyond personal ethics. Although personal ethics and professional ethics are not totally exclusive of each other, but professional values more often overrule personal ethics. Bivins claimed that "The ultimate test of any principle, personal or professional, must be the efficacy of the resulting actions based on those principles- not just for the person acting (the moral agent), but for all those involved or affected by the action^[8]."

Since we are working within the framework of ethics for media, we must be looking for an ideal moral standard of 'ought'. But ethics should not be rigid and stringent; rather it should be evolving with the moral situations. Although, we believe individual values to be the deciding principle and moral standard for the ethical decisions and media content, but in evolving world, the media morality and its content 'is' framed under various forces that operates in society. Some believe individual autonomy should be there but as the notion of Autonomy does not seem standing with the real scenario, every media institution relies on Situation ethics. In one way or other, individual decision will be influenced from social, political pressure. Personal ethics should not bar the utility of larger number of people. Thus, responsibility toward social interest should be preferred under the ethical decision made by media practitioner. By any way, humans are social being and responsible toward society.

As media is the demand of society and state, it becomes the voice of people and thus it should help in bringing upliftment and growth in society and act toward the benevolence of people with whatever moral principle suits the situation and people involved.

5. Reference

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