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THE CONCEPT OF TRUTH IN MEDIA ETHICS

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Abstract

Media ethics is the subdivision of applied ethics dealing with the specific ethical principles and standards of media, including broadcast media, television, radio, newspaper, journals, online media and magazine. It is generally accepted that correspondent, commentator, newscaster_ that is, any media professional should always seek the truth and report the truth. Truth telling is crucial in media ethics as the opposite of truth telling is considered deception of the public. A good journalist should always tell the truth and try to minimize harm as much as possible. Truth telling is an ethical norm in almost all cultures. The focal point of this paper is to prove that truth plays an important role in media ethics. The tentative solution of this paper is to provide reasons why truth in disseminating information in the media is beneficial while its reverse, twisting the truth and reporting news that is false is harmful to the public. In putting forward this argument reference will be made to the principles of right speech in Buddhists ethics based on benevolence. The research methods used are the descriptive and evaluative methods.

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Introduction

In today's age of information and technology the "media" touches the life of nearly everyone in every sphere of society, economic, social, or political. In general, the word media refers to various means of communication, information or entertainment in society; for example, television, radio, magazine, and the newspaper. Most people depend on the media, electronic or print, for information and entertainment. The media can affect the way one votes and the way one spends one's money. From the moment one gets up in the morning until the time one goes to bed at night, the media are waiting to keep people company. They sometimes influence the way one eats, talks, works, studies, and relaxes. This is the impact of media on society. The media are more than an outside influence on us. They are a part of our everyday life. So there must be ethical norms and values that the media needs to follow.

Media ethics is the subdivision of applied ethics dealing with the specific ethical principles and standards of media. Media ethics has issues of

moral principles and values as applied to the conduct, roles, and content of the mass media, in particular journalistic ethics and advertising ethics, for its working professionals as well as organizations. In relation to news coverage it includes issues such as truth, impartiality, objectivity, balance, bias, privacy, and the public interest. More generally, it also includes stereotyping, taste and decency, obscenity, freedom of speech, advertising practices such as product placement, and legal issues such as defamation. On an institutional level it includes debates over media ownership and control, commercialization, accountability, the relation of the media to the political system, issues arising from regulation (e.g. censorship) and deregulation.

Media ethics draw on a range of philosophical principles, including basic Judeo-Christian values, Aristotle's ideas about virtue and balanced behaviors (the golden mean), Kant's categorical imperative, Mill's principle of utility, Rawls' veil of ignorance, and the Hutchins Commission's social-responsibility ethics. But this paper wishes to point out for the benefit of contemporary media professionals in Myanmar that Myanmar culture also there is treasure-trove of moral principles and guidelines in the teachings of Buddhism for ethical decision making in the media. But first a survey should be made of the ethical norms and values that are appropriate for the media.

Ethical Norms and Values in the Media

New forms of communication are reshaping the practice of a once simple craft writing news and information for a local, regional or national public. Today, news media use communication technology to gather texts, video and images from around the world with unprecedented speed and varying degrees of editorial control. The same technology allows news media to disseminate this information to audiences scattered around the globe. It is now a world-wide phenomenon with news travelling from one end of the world to the other in twenty-four hours or less.

There are hundreds of codes of conduct, charters and statements made by media and professional groups outlining the principles, values and obligations of the craft of journalism. Despite these global trends, most codes of ethics contain standards for news organizations or associations in specific countries. International associations of journalists exist, and some have constructed declarations of principle. No global codes have been adopted by all media.

Most professional journalists generally accept that the following are ethical norms. The journalist should operate as trustees of the public, seek the truth, report it fairly and with integrity and independence, and stand accountable for their actions. The journalist should pursue truth aggressively and present the news accurately, in context, and as completely as possible. In media, truth is more than just a collection of facts. Facts have a relationship to one another and to other facts, forming a larger whole. They should always strive for accuracy, give all the relevant facts they have and ensure that they have been checked.

Journalists need to be as independent as they can when framing stories. They need to be aware of their own biases, including those they inherit as social class, gender and ethnicity, as well as learned professional norms. The journalist should present the news fairly and impartially, placing primary value on significance and relevance. News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind. The journalist should present the news with integrity and decency, avoiding real or perceived conflicts of interest, and respect the dignity and intelligence of the audience as well as the subjects of news. The journalist should defend the independence of all journalists from those seeking influence or control over news content. Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital. The journalists should recognize that they are accountable for their action to the public, the profession and themselves.

Another important point in the code of media ethics is to minimize harm when reporting a story. It is important for media to put out a true story without causing any harm. For example, much harm was done by reporting the Boston Marathon Bombing story. The journalists were in the right in reporting this story, but their reports contained false information and exaggerations that changed the course of the lives of these wrongly accused.

Most codes of ethics outlined in many countries for journalists are quite simple. All of them together help a journalist decide if they are being ethical or not. However, whether a reporter or journalist chooses to abide by these rules is entirely up to them. A good journalist should always tell the truth in reporting a story, and try to minimize harm as much as possible. But there are social, economic and political factors that will make a reporter, editor or publisher bend the truth. For example a newspaper might give priority to sales and circulation over truth or political affiliation over truth.

The idea of truth however is problematic. There have been many definitions and interpretations of the concept of truth throughout history of western philosophy. While the ancient Greeks tied truth to memory, Plato was the first to link truth to human rationality and intellect. According to Plato, truth was knowable only to the human intellect - it could not be touched or verified by experience. Medieval theologians believed truth was revealed only by God or by the Church. John Milton suggested that competing notions of the truth should be allowed to coexist, until the ultimate truth eventually emerging. Milton's assertions foreshadowed the philosophy of the Enlightenment, from which modern journalism borrows its notion of truth. The Enlightenment cast truth in secular terms, divorced from the church, and developed a "correspondence theory" of truth still held today. The correspondence theory asserts that truth should correspond to external facts, events or observations. The Enlightenment concept of truth was linked to what human beings could perceive with their senses harnessed through the intellect. Truth has become increasingly tied to what is written down, what can be empirically verified, what can be perceived by human senses experience.¹

The Concept of Truth in Buddhist Ethics

The code of ethics is important for the media because the public depends on it for the 'Truth'. The public depends on the media for daily information regarding what is going on in their town as well as their country. Truthfulness in reporting means more than accuracy and telling the truth to get a story. Truthfulness also means not misrepresenting the people or the situations in the story to readers or viewers. In order for a journalist to gain respect, credibility and trust from their audience, they must report the truth. According to Buddhism, to gain the trust from others one has to speak the truth the following these guidance. They are:

- the tendency to speak of having not seen things that have not been seen;
- the tendency to speak of having not heard things that have not been heard;
- the tendency to speak of having not experienced things that have not been experienced;

¹ Philip Pattern, (2008) *Media Ethics (issues @ cases)*, New York:Mc Graw Hill, p.22

- the tendency to speak of having not realized things that have not been realized;
- the tendency to speak of having seen things that have been seen;
- the tendency to speak of having heard things that have been heard;
- the tendency to speak of having experienced things that have been experienced;
- the tendency to speak of having realized things that have been realized.¹

As mentioned earlier today's media now operation in a pluralistic and global community has great impact and their reports can have far-reaching effects – good or bad. News reports, via satellite or the internet, reach people around the world and influence the action of governments, militaries, humanitarian agencies and warring ethnic groups. It is also the duty of journalists to take the time to gather true information before they report on a story. Once journalist start reporting on things that are not true, their credibility is lost.

Telling the truth however require knowledge and understanding. The Buddha provided four criteria of right speech, that is, speech that will lead to recognition that truth is being spoken. In *Digha Nikaya, Samannaphala Sutta*, the Buddha said that one can reach the truth if he or she abides by the rule of right speech and that there are four kinds of right speech. They are: abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech and from idle chatter.² The implication is that truth requires right speech and avoiding false speech.

So, a person refrains from false speech (*musavācā*), that is strictly abstains from false speech, speaks only the truth, be honesty, and is believable, with no intention to deceive the world. This can be a guideline for the media. Truth telling is crucial in media ethics but any opposition of truth telling is considered deception. Anything shown by the media whether print or video is considered to be original. When a statement is written in an article or video is shown of a public official, it should be as close to the original words

¹ t*lw&f? tmywb, 0*f? yXraOg[m&okvf

² 'lCeUm, ? obvuE0*? omrnzvokw? pVobV

or event as possible. It should not cause divisiveness or any kind of misunderstanding.

A person should refrain from divisive words, strictly abstains from divisive words and slander (*pisunavācā*) that may bring about hatred, enmity, disunity and disharmony among individuals or groups of people. Having heard something from this party, one does not take it over to tell another party to cause mischief and create enemy or discord, but will unite people who have broken up and return them to concord and will support people who are in concord and thereby strengthen harmony. A person who favors harmony, who delights in harmony, who is content with concord, speaks only words that cause concord. So, in a program on a controversial public issues the media is required to give fair representation to opposing sides of issues. The media ought not to broadcast rumors that may incite ethnic and religious strife in a region. Even in the reporting of facts one should not use language to incite unrest and discord.

Then there is the case of using indecent and vulgar words (*pharusavācā*); this also distorts the truth. So one should abstains from speaking crude words and abusive words, and speaks politely using words that are blameless, sweet to the ear, words that are positive and inspire love and mutual respect. Even the animals dislike vulgar and abusive speech. A new study reveals that children who have been exposed to swear words in media become more physically aggressive than others who have not been so exposed. So the media should refrain from the use of obscene and offensive language for this leads the public astray from the truth.

A person should also refrain from frivolous speech and idle chatter, strictly abstains from idle gossip (*samphappalapavācā*); and speaks only at the proper time and place; speaks only words that bring benefit to others; speaks only words that have a basis, a foundation of reference, and which are appropriate to the situation.

The above are ancient Buddhist teachings regarding right speech and wrong speech. It implicitly states that saying the right thing in the right way will lead one to the truth whereas the wrong type of speech (or writing) will hide the truth and create disharmony.

Today, social networking has also become very important in our culture. The social media has provided much faster way to share gossip. In only a matter of minutes, harmful gossip and rumors can spread online. Also,

one should avoid slanderous speech concerning the personal or private affairs of others, even if one knows it is true. Gossip may be amusing to some but it can cause great harm to the person or people concerned. Then there is hate speech that can disrupt peace and harmony in society. According to Buddhist ethics, one should speak about others in ways that invite compassion, humility and social healing. This could be a norm that promotes the integrity of the media. So, media professionals should avoid language that is obscene and malicious

In *Ambalattthika-rahulovāda Sutta*, the Buddha advises to *Rahulā*, to reflect on speech, before, during, and after speaking.¹ The verbal action that one commits can lead to harm for others, or lead to harm for both sides; is it an unwholesome verbal action with sufferings as its return and suffering (*dukkha*) as its result? If one reflects and then feels that it is so, then one absolutely should not indulge in such a verbal action.

If one reflects and then feels that: "this verbal action that one desires to do, does not lead to harm for oneself, does not lead to harm for others, and does not lead to harm for either; it is a wholesome verbal action, that has joy as its return and has joy as its result"; then, one ought to so speak.

While speaking (or writing or communication to others) reflect upon that action: "this verbal action that one is doing, does it harm oneself, does it harm others, or does it harm either side; is it an unwholesome verbal action with sufferings as its return and with suffering (*dukkha*) as its result?" If one considers and then feels it is so, one ought to abandon such a verbal action.

If one considers and then feels that: "this verbal action that one is doing, does not harm oneself, does not harm others, and does not harm either side; it is a wholesome verbal action with joy as its return and with joy as its result"; then, one ought to so speak.

When one has already spoken, reflect upon that verbal act: this verbal action that one has done, did it harm oneself, did it harm others, or did it harm either side; was it an unwholesome verbal action with sufferings as its return and sufferings as its result?" If one reflects and then feels that it was so, one ought to announce, confess, and make it right. Once it is announced, confessed, and made right, one should be careful and restrained henceforth.

¹ rZredum, ! bdu0*! trÁXu&m[kvmoq' okvi

If one reflects and then feels that: "this verbal action that one has done, did not harm oneself, did not harm others, and did not harm either party; it was a wholesome verbal action with joy as its return and with joy as its result"; then, one ought to be contented and delighted, and continue this exercise in wholesome *dhammas* both during the day and during the night.

Human Right in Media Ethics

Nowadays, freedom of speech and freedom of expression are recognized in international and regional human rights law. In the article 19 of The Universal Declaration of Human Right, it is stated that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. This freedom should be enjoyed by everyone without interference, irrespective including the media. This however needs further reflection.

If there is no right to freedom of expression, justice and freedom will be lost. Freedom of speech and freedom of thought are interrelated to each other. Freedom of speech is also related to freedom of thought. But this does not mean one is free to verbally attack people on either religious or ethnic grounds. That is not what freedom of expression means. One's rights and freedoms must not transgress the rights and freedoms of others. The media needs to understand this.

The right to freedom of opinions is formed carefully after taking all relevant factors into consideration, for one's opinions can affect oneself and others for opinion can lead to action. Then the interest of the people at large must also be considered. For example, revelation of military secrets and other sensitive government information may be contrary to the public interest, even if it is true; such news should not be spread or leaked. The right to freedom of expression must be exercised with responsibility, so as not to cause harm either to others or to oneself. The journalist should respect individual's right to privacy too unless it is related to criminal or anti-social behavior, corruption or injustice, and indifference to public interest. It must always be borne in mind that the moral worth of an action needs to be measured in term of intent as well as in terms of its consequences.

Most scholars understand that the media have different effects on different types of people with different results. Generalizations about the media's effects are easy to make but difficult to prove. Media helps in fighting

against corruption, nepotism, cronyism of institutional machinery and carrying out relentless campaign against them. They have also encouraged and helped to bring about various much needed social reforms. But the reverse is also true and is the reason why there is a need for media ethics.

The media ought to always keep in mind the good of the people. It should not indulge in hate speech which can wreak havoc in today's tightly linked world. A narrow-minded, patriotic media can stampede countries into war. The media should not be a purely business venture with profit and circulation as its only motive. In the light of Buddhist ethics, this would not be a right livelihood because its prosperity comes from the harm it does to people. Right livelihood is that which causes no harm to any living being. One should acquire profit and wealth only by moral and legal means, not morally or illegally; one should acquire it peacefully, without coercion or violence; one should acquire it honestly, not by trickery or deceit; and one should acquire it in ways which do not entail harm and suffering for others. Likewise media ethics if it abstains from slander and falsehoods to promote its success would be adhering not only to media ethics but to the Buddhist ethical norm of right livelihood.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that, in today's world, most of the people believe that communication is very important for without proper communication a society or nation will remain undeveloped at best or be overwhelmed and exploited by other nations at worst. Information is necessary. Good communication is necessary.

So, the media plays a very important role for all nations. But as stated above the media can also be a dangerous weapon as it can harm people far and near. So there is an urgent need for media ethics and for media professionals to abide by an ethical code of conduct and build up integrity. They must therefore conduct themselves ethically as professionals as well as individuals. The media world-wide, share certain ethical norms and values but cultural and ethical traditions of a country can also help strengthen belief in these norms which can thus lead to putting them into practice with right good will.

This paper has attempted to show that the principles and norms of Buddhist ethics are relevant to media ethics and that it can help our Myanmar media professionals who are just beginning to enjoy freedom of expression

understand that such freedom does not mean the license to write or broadcast or televise whatever they wish; that such freedom must not be at the coast of one's people or one's country and that there is an ethical dimension to the dissemination of information in speech or writing and there have been guidelines for right speech in Myanmar cultural and cognitive beliefs which can lead a person to uncover that which is true and speak the truth for the benefit of the many.

It is hoped that emerging and developing Myanmar media and its budding professionals will understand that the traditional Myanmar moral guidelines and prescriptions can play a role in the sphere of medias ethics and that if only they would follow them they would become media professionals who value truth and integrity.

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