

Gandhian Model of Journalism – Past, Present and Future in the context of New Media

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Abstract

From the books written on Mahatma Gandhi to the movies made on the same; print and electronic media have fairly elaborated on the life and works of Mahatma Gandhi. Yet one of the aspects of his life which remains fairly unexplored by the mainstream media is his career as a journalist. Gandhiji worked as a journalist and edited four well known journals. The Indian Opinion, Young India, Navajivan and the Harijan. He treated newspaper and journalism as a responsibility and not mere communication or profit making business. His newspapers were tools of communication, change and upliftment of the deprived class who writhed against the structures of oppression. Truth, accuracy, fairness and impartiality rooted the basic premise of Satyagrahi journalistic ethics proposed by Gandhi. While media /journalism ethics is a vast subject and still remains debatable, the general approach of this branch is concerned with actions that are morally permissible and actions that are not. It may vary with time, culture, demographics and personal needs/choices and so on. The ethics of journalism have many aspects: law, instructions, professional norms, good manners and politeness guidelines. Yet, credibility is considered to be the key for this profession since inception.

This paper aims to explore the journalistic ethics proposed by Mahatma Gandhi and the contrasting journalistic practices post Gandhian era. It will also be an elaborate account on history of ‘fake news’ and how fake news penetrates into the smallest corners of the country due to accessibility and availability digital tools. In present era, when the contemporary media scenario bristles with ‘fake news’, sensationalism, over-riding role of market forces in the media and the advertorials edging out the editorials it would be worthwhile to revisit Mahatma Gandhi's ethics, canon of journalism and his contribution as a journalist.

Key words: Satyagrahi Model of Journalism, Ethics, Communication, News, Fake News

Introduction

The words ‘journalist’, ‘journal’ and ‘journalism’ are derived from the French ‘journal’, which in turn comes from the Latin word ‘diurnalis’ or ‘daily’. (Kumar). American Press Institute defines Journalism as the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information or the product of all these activities combined. With journalism being a profession that deliberates on various functions and roles, the most important function of journalism is dissemination of information. Conveying information is the key for democratic decision-making system, as it is ought to bring transparency into society and ensures that the propelled decisions go along with the people’s sense of justice. In addition to this, Journalism also explains things and phenomena in an easy and accessible way and describes the cause-effect-relationships of events by providing background information on issues and decisions. Journalism tries to whet people’s appetite for learning new things and entertains, evokes emotion and experiences. It offers perspectives on stories and events which people can relate to. It also acts as a two-way channel between the public and policymakers. On one hand, it disseminates information to the citizens about what is happening in society and on the other

hand it lets the policymakers know what kinds of impacts their previous decisions have had and what kinds of decisions have been made elsewhere. In this day and age, press or media in general are occasionally referred to as the watchdog of society or the fourth estate. Based on the Montesquieu's tripartite system, the other estates in modern democracies are often referred to branches of a legislature, an executive, and a judiciary. The watchdog refers to the fact that press or journalists are supposed to guard the policymakers' actions. In the recent years social media has been proposed to be the fifth estate. The field of Journalism has undergone a massive transformation in past three decades. With internet becoming the treasure trove of news and information journalism and news has penetrated in the smallest corners of the world. Twitter, blogs, and citizen journalism have contributed successfully in making the entire world just like one big family. Journalism in this era is not the monopoly of a few institutions or individuals; it is a medium, broader and more sought for than before and hence it faces the risk of being drowned out by the cacophony. The circulation of information in the name of facts/news on social media has been creating chaos and is alarming. 'Fake news' is today so much more than a label for false and misleading information, disguised and disseminated as news. It has become an emotional, weaponised term used to undermine and discredit journalism. (United Nations Educational, 2018). The practice of journalism was started mainly started order to provide information of various events and it has changed tracks since then. What started as a medium of communication has now lost the hold of its nominal definitions. Various formats have been introduced alongside the traditional formats of journalism and it is both advantageous and disadvantageous for the society at large. This paper is an attempt to cover history and future of journalism and relevance of ethical journalism in today's era with the reference of Gandhian Model of Journalism.

History of Journalism in India

History of journalism in India dates back to the British era when the printing press came into existence. The first newspaper published in India was the Bengal Gazette generally known as Hickey's Gazzette or Journal from the name of its founder, James Augustus Hickey. The entire newspaper consisted of only four pages and was renowned for fearlessly criticizing the political policies of the East India Company. From 1780-1793, six papers were started in Calcutta, three in Madras (now Chennai) and three in Bombay (now Mumbai). This era can be marked as the revolutionary period for journalism as several acts passed by the British Government and East India Company were stringent curbs over the Indian Press. Hickey too was arrested for putting forth his liberal views against the oppressive government. Through the newspapers, a nationalistic rebellion was slowly being pieced together through words and symbols. The Press was fiercely involved in rallying the masses and the British government was increasingly becoming apprehensive about the Press' freedom. The "Gagging Act" passed by Lord Lytton was driven to control the Indian publications' content and it compelled all Indian publications to apply for a license from the government, while also ensuring that nothing was written against the British government nor was the government challenged in any way. In 1878, British India passed the Vernacular Press Act, to restrain the freedom of the Indian press and the expression of disapproval of the British regime in oriental languages. This instigated many journalists to fearlessly pick up their pens, and continue to publish nationalist articles calling for Swaraj, openly criticize British rule, and call people to action. The journalism during pre-independence era hence primarily rose out of the need to unite the nation by spreading accurate information and the role of journalists traditionally

adhered to writing articles and stories pertaining to the freedom movement. Generating revenue by publishing ads started much later and most of the editors and writers stuck to publishing news for the welfare of public.

Gandhi – as a Journalist

Gandhian Journalism was also a product of rebel against the British rule. He started his career as a journalist much earlier but what still remains profound is the principles and views that he articulated through his works during the freedom movement.

Mahatma Gandhi was a politician, fighter for minority rights in South Africa and social reformer. He recognized that communication is the most effective tool to shape opinion and mobilize popular support. During his practice as a lawyer in South Africa, he was exposed to circumstances in which the people, particularly Indians lived and this prompted him to take up their cause and start writing about it. Initially he used local newspapers as a medium to express his views through letters and interviews and later decided to take up journalism by launching his first newspaper, Indian Opinion, in 1903. His idea of Journalism revolved around various forms of storytelling and addressing the issues of the oppressed.

As soon as he returned from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi purchased a printing press, Navajivan Publishing House; to publish his monthly, Navajivan in Gujarati from Ahmedabad. Navajivan was later converted into a weekly and Gandhi took over its editorship on September 7, 1919. During this period Indian press had gone through its birth pangs and was considerably vitalized by a reformist and nationalist zeal. Gandhi acquired Young India English weekly on October 8, 1919 from the Home Rule Leaguers of Bombay, actual founders of it and started publication. However, Young India was shut in 1932 owing to repressive acts of the British administration. He later went on to establishing Harijan Sevak Sangh and on the request of the Sangh, he started Harijan (English) as a weekly in February 1933 of which Harijanbandhu, Harijansevak are Gujarati and Hindi editions, respectively.

Gandhian journalism emphasized on four criteria of news namely, culture, probity in public life, peace and development. These four areas were covered exhaustively and he emphasized on them due to his personal experience derived from his philosophy of non-violence (ahimsa), self-reliance (swadeshi), self-rule (swaraj) and truth force (satyagraha). The sole aim of a newspaper for the Mahatma was service. Gandhian journalism emerged from the philosophy and values practiced and propagated by Gandhi in his life time through his publications i.e. Indian Opinion, Young India, Navajeevan (Gujarati) and Harijan. Gandhi used his four newspapers to propagate his views through persuasion, discussion and debate. The power of the government in imposing restriction on printing presses also did not daunt him. He articulated the fact that newspapers could be brought out hand written. Gandhi lamented about journalism as a profession and he pointed out that in India whoever fails to find a better occupation takes to journalism provided he can scribble. Journalism is one noble profession whose power and responsibility he firmly believed.

Gandhian Journalism Ethics

Gandhi called himself as journalist throughout his life. Practicing ethics in journalism was a main factor that transformed an ordinary Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into Mahatma Gandhi. Almost all of his works aimed at moral transformation of the individual while reinforcing moral conduct in him. Gandhi's Journalism was a derivative of his concepts of Satyagraha that he practiced throughout his life. Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha is an integrated concept that included truth, non-violence, non-stealing, chastity or brahmacharya, poverty or non-possession, bread labour, fearlessness, control of the palate, tolerance, swadeshi and removal of untouchability. Accuracy, objectivity, fairness, balance and impartiality are the basic premise of reporting he said. "It is a reporter's responsibility to pursue the truth and present facts as they are. Readers/viewers are entitled to know the sources of the story if there is no request for anonymity. No story or source should be quoted out of context. Satyagrahi journalist holds no malice or prejudice against anyone,"

Gandhi was against publishing advertisements as 'commercial speech' as recognized by US courts that go against the editorial content. He wrote in Young India (January 9, 1930) that "It is a matter of sorrow that in a country like India, where drink is almost universally admitted to be vice, there are respectable newspapers enough to be found to take advertisements for the sale of spirituous liquor whilst their editorial columns favour total prohibition" He also appealed in Harijan (24 August 1935) to take extreme caution for truth in advertisement that: "My plea is for due regard for truth in advertising. Gandhi felt that journalism should not be a vocation for earning a living. It should be a means to serve the public, an aid to a larger goal.

New age journalism

With the advent of 21st century and the arrival of new media, the concepts of journalism have transformed significantly and drastically. Micro-blogging and Citizen Journalism have opened avenues for general public to publish online. Citizen journalists have been producing content that would normally only be possible for professionally educated journalists otherwise. Now, publishing news-worthy articles has become accessible for both classes of journalism as a result of new media. New media has fundamentally changed the production of news regarding recent and important events as well as the way we acquire it. Traditional journalism while promotes authenticity, reliable sourcing and valid evidence through major media companies and the use of gate-keeping, the new media is promoting handy and easy consumption of news. In the day and age of digital media, the attention span of readers and viewers to consume the entire stories has shrunk and catchy headlines, sensational pictures and click bait articles in a listicle formats have more or less replaced the traditional formats of consuming news reports

Fake news – History and Consequence

Fake news is news, stories or hoaxes created to deliberately misinform or deceive readers. These stories are generally created to influence or manipulate the views of people, push a political agenda, push propaganda or cause confusion and can often be a profitable business for online publishers. Fake news/stories can be deceptive most of the times as they are created on trusted websites or using similar names and web addresses to reputable news organisations. Although Fake news has become a hot topic in recent years, mobilisation and manipulation of information was a feature of history long before modern journalism established standards which define news as a genre based on particular rules of integrity. An early record dates back to ancient Rome, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy

Octavian launched a smear campaign against him with “short, sharp slogans written upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets.” The perpetrator became the first Roman Emperor and fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all. It also has its roots in Indian history and mythology. “Naro Va Kunjaro Va” incident/story from Mahabharata can be described as the best use of fake news and the phrase, now commonly used when one wishes to cleverly confuse the listener while not uttering a falsehood. However, technology and digitization has made the manipulation and fabrication of content simple. Social networking sites radically augment the falsehoods peddled by states, politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics. One of the recent examples of circulation of the fake news is the articles and WhatsApp forwards regarding the Pulwama attacks. It was reported that images of people in the name of terrorism were being circulated. Nationalist propaganda messages by calling out names, political references, morphed images and speech bytes were also circulated that further worsened the situation. In the recent year heat generated due to fake news has resulted into riots, lynching and propaganda generation which has spread like fire that is difficult to stop.

The Rise of Fake News

Traditionally we got our news from trusted sources, journalists and media outlets that are required to follow strict codes of practice. Citation of sources, following media practices and cross-referencing were some of the practices that were strictly adhered to. With the rise of social media sites and networks it can often be difficult to tell whether stories are credible or not. Information overload and lack of general awareness about how the internet works by people has also contributed to the considerable rise of fake news and hoax stories. Click bait articles, misleading headlines, tweets/posts from parody accounts and satire are the common formats of fake news consumed by general public on a regular basis. Media is no longer a passive channel; it is actively consumed - created, shared, liked, commented on, attacked and defended in all sorts of different ways millions of people. The algorithms used by tech companies and social networking sites are brilliantly designed to personalize and tailor these services to each user's profile. When we go online or login to a social network we are generally presented the content based on our own searches online. This type of content is a mirror to our own likes, views and beliefs and therefore isolating us from differing views and opinions. This is often referred to as a filter bubble.

Journalism of 21st Century- Fake news and Gandhian ethics – two contrasting practices

Mahatma Gandhi with his strong built of character; logical thinking and ability of rouse emotions proved himself as a journalist for masses. Mahatma Gandhi had used his newspapers as channels of mass communication and mouthpieces; to him it was a vehicle to propagate his views. Unfortunately, the foundations of Indian press and journalism laid by Mahatma Gandhi are moving back in the milieu due to gradual adoption of tabloidization which emphasizes on sensationalism, sex, and surprises. News reports are biased and personal involvement of journalists is quite visible in the newspapers. Earlier the journalism was motivated by the need for social change in which is now slowly disappearing. Journalism as service to the society has been replaced by journalism aimed at profit and affluence for

media promoters and media workers. Probity in public life and development has been replaced by crime and political news respectively. Instead of news related to probity in public life, newspapers prioritize crime news of murders, suicide, thefts and so on. Along with these malpractices, publication and circulation of fake and hoax stories is a highly contrasting practice to what Satyagrahi model of Journalism stood for.

Relevance of Journalism ethics proposed by Gandhi – For present and Future

In respect of ethics, Gandhian journalism needs to be looked closely as it has great relevance even today. In previous Lok Sabha elections, some language papers published a different type of stories, which were neither considered as news nor advertisements. P. Sainath pointed out that “If it was news, the reports we have compiled must rank amongst the most remarkable news judgments ever. If this was advertising, why was it not clearly marked as such? If it was not advertising, then it was ‘paid news’ a term now firmly embedded in the media lexicon”. Gandhi model of journalism seems quite contemporary, as most of the issues that he has raised about advertising are still relevant and is part of legal or self-regulation. Malpractices of in today’s journalism are unerringly contradictory to Gandhian ethics. Ethics, Journalistic practices and the generation of content are some variables that differ based on various factors like law, demography, personal choices, personal/regional bias, environment etc. Imposing regulations can just better the conditions and does not certainly promise the change. It has been observed that malpractices like fake news have a history and so has the media ethics. Both have been adapted and practiced equally. Companies like Google and Facebook have announced new measures to tackle fake news with the introduction of reporting and flagging tools. Media organizations like the BBC and Channel 4 have also established fact checking sites while these are welcome developments, digital media literacy and developing skills to critically evaluate information are essential skills for anyone navigating the internet and especially for young people. WhatsApp, which is considered to be the tool most used for spreading hatred and fake news, came up with this feature of where it showed if the message was self-generated or was a forwarded one.

The ideals put forward by Gandhi and his journalistic experiments are still more relevant than in his times. He was a man of peace but triggered the process of transformation, questioning, and independent thinking in a conservative society. He stood for international ideas, universal approach and contemporary responses. The most important feature of his journalism was the usage of simple words and mass connectivity which is the most required aspect for journalism in today’s day and age. Today when the market forces have taken over journalism, Gandhian legacy should be a beacon light to all budding journalists. Profit motive should be subordinated to ethical values. Gandhi’s fearlessness and truthfulness in reporting and publishing news even at the cost of his personal interest are worth emulating.

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