

Media Unde Fire

The Case for Ethics

By SHAKUNTALA RAO and NAVJIT SINGH JOHAL

One April evening in 2002, U.S. Representative Bernie Sanders invited the citizens of Vermont to a town hall meeting at Burlington. The topic was media reform in a democratic society. Teachers, parents, artists and plumbers passionately and intelligently criticized the media for becoming part of the “best government money can buy” system and called their coverage of political campaigns dreadful.

People do not want political campaigns to be centered entirely around expensive, inaccurate and insulting political advertising, media activist Robert McChesney told the meeting that night. “They do not want America’s democratic discourse reduced to poll-tested sound bites and arguments about which television anchor is wearing the biggest flag pin,” he said.

How people perceive the media depends on how it tackles important ethical and moral issues. Aly Colon, columnist for the *Poynter Institute Ethics Journal*, says: “Reporters watch candidates during elections but viewers watch reporters. And what people see journalists saying, or doing, may affect how much credibility they

Media ethics runs parallel to public trust and credibility. The loss of one results in the loss of the other. Chanchal Manohar Singh, executive editor of *Indian Reporter*, warns journalists: “Quit assuming that the public doesn’t care about media ethics. As any journalist who has ever been cornered at a cocktail party can tell you, they are interested. Deeply.”

One ethical issue facing the media in both countries is the use of hidden cameras as news gathering tools. American journalists have used hidden cameras for a long time. But in 1995, the practice came under intense scrutiny when ABC’s “Prime Time Live” telecast a story alleging unsanitary food handling practices at Food Lion, a major supermarket chain. To investigate the story—Food Lion was not likely to give ABC camera crews unfettered access to its property—ABC employees submitted phony résumés and went undercover as supermarket staff. They used hidden camera video footage to expose malfeasance by Food Lion. The supermarket chain sued ABC for trespass and fraud. The jury’s verdict—\$5.5 million against ABC—touched off a wide-ranging debate on ethics.

In India, the Tehelka news portal started the trend, first with an investigation of bribe-taking and match-fixing in cricket, then a more far-reaching sting: two Tehelka journalists posing as arms dealers tried to sell non-existent military devices to politicians, defense officials and bureaucrats, luring them with bribes and prostitutes. The journalists captured the transactions on a hidden camera and showed the footage at a news conference.

Some critics say this is “cowboy journalism,” a search for “gotcha” more than the truth. Hidden cameras, says Bob Steele, author of *Doing Ethics in Journalism*, “should be the last tools out of



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At the Patiala media ethics workshop, (left to right) moderator Navjit Singh Johal, Taranjit Singh of Punjabi University, moderator Shakuntala Rao, Hindustan Times correspondent Anuradha Shukla, Punjab Today TV news reader Rajnish Sehgal.

attach to what journalists report.”

Just over 35 percent of Americans consider journalists to be “moral,” according to the Pew Research Center. One in five readers believes newspapers “distort” and “manipulate” facts, says *Journalism Studies*. The erosion of credibility and confidence in the media is often related to the public’s perception that the media ship is sailing without a moral compass.

The United States and India each have a vibrant and free press; both media receive similar public rebuke on ethics. At a series of media ethics workshops sponsored by the U.S. Embassy that we moderated this year, Indian journalists expressed concern about ethical standards. “Public trust in Indian journalism is at its lowest,” said Bajinder Pal Singh, a senior correspondent for *Indian Express*.

the bag, to be used only when we have already ruled out all other options for obtaining the same information. Such deception must meet the ‘importance’ threshold only in pursuing a highly important and otherwise elusive truth.”

These cases point to the ethical dilemmas the media face. Media ethicist Clifford Christians says, “Moral thinking is a systematic process: a judgment is made and action taken. Moral decisions made by the journalist need to be transparent.” □

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