

Audiences' Perception of Media Ethics Principles On Iran Television News

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Media ethics is a critical aspect of media processes. Because of the significance of television news coverage, this paper covers two media ethics principles, "freedom of expression" and "objectivism" applicable to television, specifically Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB). IRIB is a state owned media with nationwide network and enjoys elevated dignity in the community. Using survey method, the study makes examines journalism and communication lecturers' and students' perceptions towards media ethics principles on Iran news TV. The results revealed that IRIB TV did not consider the two media ethics principles mentioned above in news broadcasting. At the end we have made a series of suggestions to develop, expand, and institutionalize the media ethics in the news broadcasted by Iranian national media.

Because advanced technologies, specifically new media, are owned by wealthy and powerful nations, and employed for expansionist goals around the globe, the healthy atmosphere of media and communication has been badly polluted. When confronted with such a poisonous atmosphere, ethics can no longer be referred to as a basic and fundamental concept of culture in a community and its mass media.

Media as a platform which can measure good and evil values in today's world is the only instrument and standard that, along with law and human rights, can provoke problems and tension among individuals in all fields.

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, deals with human morality and is often regarded as moral philosophy. The origin of the term *ethics*, or *ethos*, implies "custom," "usage," and "character." The fundamental purpose of ethics is to compare "the meaning of abstract terms such as good, right, justice, and fairness" and "to identify those values that are the best moral values" (Day, 2005, p. 4). According to Elliott (1997), ethics can also be considered as studying "moral judgment, rules, principles, or ideals" and is often characterised as "philosophical ethics." Therefore, journalism ethics strives to explore what manner and behaviour of media and media practitioners are ethically acceptable.

Observing media ethics, like observation of good ethics in other fields, is based on values and principles which can determine which is right and which is wrong. A media void of ethics is a media without identity, bewildered and unbridled, and a chaotic field to disseminate unfounded news (Motamednejad, 2000).

Without ethics, media lack a correct mechanism of criticism and are like a house without a foundation, where it respects no law with regard to human rights and certainly has no place in the world of media. Television, as an institution which belongs to the society and which is expected to be in touch with individuals and groups that play a key role in disseminating information, is not an exception from the above rules.

Mohammadi (2000) argues that electronic media, which covers a larger field, are more sensitive compared to print media and if grossly funded by governments can impose more limitations over common ethics because in such an atmosphere public opinion applies much pressure on it.

Also being capable of broadcasting live news everywhere, television is one of the main institutions in which all media ethics must be duly observed.

On the top of TV programs, TV news must also follow a series of ethical values such as truth, precision, professional independence, freedom of expression, information dissemination, and so on (Motamednejad, 2000). As individuals and public opinions depend on the type of news and information they receive from their environment, especially from a widespread media like television, it is time to scrutinize to what extent media take into account ethical principles in coverage of media contents capable of shaping public opinion and peoples' reaction against their environment.

Thus if television fails to take into account the abovementioned ethics during news broadcasts, the people will not believe the news and therefore television cannot gain public credence, confidence, or support. Lack of public support will cause the television industry to lose its credibility, and its absence will pose difficulties in the future.

In other words, if the managers or staff of the media fail to follow the minimum ethics and moral principals in their profession, their credibility and legitimacy will be jeopardized. It is necessary for the TV industry to compel itself to observe media and professional ethics regardless of any political, economic, or social interests. This cannot be done unless the TV network gains the confidence of its audience, promotes dignity, and brings peace to the community.

Media Ethics

The media are directly confronted with people's rights and the relation between the media and the people in the community is very sophisticated. Thus by mere law, the media cannot guarantee to act correctly versus the community and the individuals. Overcoming the challenge, media should observe not only the law, but ethics as well.

To a great extent, media scientists consider media ethics as a valuable platform which can help reporters (and other media staff) create their general principles and codes corresponding to ethical principles. Media ethics consists of a series of covenants, behaviours, regulations, directives, and documents which the media editors or employees must adhere to in a society (Motamednejad, 2000).

Researchers such as Schreiber (1974), the famous French journalist, believe that a single person cannot define journalistic (media) ethics because according to him, the sophisticated matters related to ethics are defined by individuals according to the way they look at them. Meanwhile Schreiber refers to the urgent need for devising media ethics (Asadi, 2002, p. 68).

Plaisance (2007) argues that the significance of journalism ethics has increasingly grown. Now, more than ever, journalism and mass communication educational curriculum need a media ethics class as a part of media and journalism essentials.

History of Drafting Professional Journalistic-Media Ethics in the World

The need to prepare and approve moral ethics for journalists was felt at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century parallel with the expansion of news and commercial press. "This matter was considered first of all by professional associations, syndicates, and guilds of press and journalism in Western countries. Since then professional international and regional organizations and the United Nations supported such endeavours" (Motamednejad, 2000, p. 13).

The history of drafting professional ethics for reporters goes back to 1912. In fact, in establishing the first press association, the Norwegians also drafted the first professional ethics for the press. In 1916 the Swedes, who were followed by the French in 1918, the Finns in 1919, and the Americans in 1922, took necessary steps to devise ethics principles for journalists (Asadi, 2002, p. 67).

Motamednejad (2000) points out that during their several decades of operation these councils and associations didn't change much. Since 1969, only in Sweden the selected representatives of professional organizations (i.e., the press and their journalists) set up a special office known as Ombudsman which acted as intermediary and arbiter between the one of the complaints filed against the press and those who judged the council of press.

After World War II professional media ethics codes were drafted and ratified in many countries. Among developing countries which were able to devise such codes for their press one might mention India (1947), Turkey (1960), Chile (1963), South Korea (1964), Indonesia (1967), Nigeria (1970), and Egypt (1972) (Asadi, 2002, p. 42).

History of Introduction of Media Ethics in Iran

So far no serious and effective step has been taken to ratify and enforce ethics for the media in Iran. During Pahlavi's dynasty (1920-1979), due to unfavourable and stifling political atmosphere, limitations were applied to the press, unfavourable conditions existed for reporters, and the regime failed to pay attention to freedom of the press and by the government. The only time when reference was made to media ethics at that period was an 8-point regulation which was approved in September 1963 by the board of directions of the Iranian syndicate of writers and journalists (Motamednejad, 2000, p. 21).

That regulation called for the press to serve the public, avoid dishonourable deeds, remain impartial, and love truth and information. This established the first foundation of journalism which asked journalists or media practitioners to clarify facts while refraining from disclosing the signature of the columnists or refraining from revealing such news which harmed state officials and ordinary people (with the exception of cases when the national interest was being addressed).

Moreover, acts such as refraining from disclosing unsubstantiated news, confessing mistakes, quoting the source of the news, not distorting facts when quoting from a given source or publishing interviews without the permission of the person who had been interviewed, were deemed principles that journalists must pay heed to when reporting news and stories.

After the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, because of closure of the abovementioned syndicates and failure to establish new professional press syndicates and organizations, it was impossible to draft and ratify the required media ethics code. This impelled the board of directors of the standing syndicate to draft another article of association which was never ratified. The government introduced a series of parameters which held the mass media responsible to the nation and the government.

Six years after victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, or Majlis, imposed the following prohibitions during news dissemination:

- Publishing sinful material and subjects opposed to the Islamic code
- Promoting pornography and unlawful things and acting in a way that violated public dignity and chastity
- Promoting luxury and extravagance
- Encouraging acts which harmed the community
- Disclosing military secrets and closed door Majlis discussions
- Insulting Islam
- Committing plagiarism
- Publishing libellous articles against the officials of governmental organizations and individuals and insulting real and lawful persons whose dignity was respected by the law even in the form of picture or caricature
- Issuing false news

Since then, the above prohibitions have been observed to control the press (Kamalipour, 1993, p. 39).

In December of 1996 the conference of “First Common Press Ethics for Muslim Journalists” was convened with a goal to promote solidarity and cooperation among the journalists of Islamic states. During the convention of the “Second Seminar for Examination of the Problems of the Iranian Press” held in May 1997, a series of professional ethics principles called “The Charter of Journalists’ Professional Ethics” was proposed to the gathering and to the government, but was never ratified. Furthermore, no established rules have been devised to observe media ethics in television. Nevertheless, Iran lacks a well integrated media ethic code based on international principles and standards and we need to remove the obstacles in the way of devising such a code.

Principles of Media Ethics for News Dissemination

Being a medium for broadcasting news, the media exposes dual or sometimes conflicting performances. Surely everyone tries to benefit from the media to advance his or her opinion. If the machinery of the media fails to observe ethical principles and standards this vehicle of communication will become a destructive tool against humanity. Journalism ethics and standards comprise principles of ethics and of good practice as applicable to the specific challenges faced by professional journalists. The basic professional code of ethics commonly appears in statements drafted by both professional journalism associations and individual

print, broadcast, and online news organizations. While various existing codes have some differences, most share common elements including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and public accountability (IFJ-International Federation of Journalists Declaration, ASNE—American Society of Newspapers Editors Statement, SPJ—Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, Sept. 2009).

In other words, based on general media ethics principles of different countries on the international level, the media is compelled particularly to follow specific ethical principles, including:

- Freedom of expression and free flow of information
- Objectivism
- Accuracy
- Truthfulness
- Impartiality and fairness
- Respecting individual privacy
- Social responsibility
- Protecting national interests and security
- Protecting national and religious identity
- Protecting public decency
- Independence
- Campaign against promoting violence
- Avoiding exaggeration, repetition, and overemphasizing
- Avoiding distortion
- Respecting audience
- Avoiding all kinds of discriminations

The current study only focuses on two of these codes: freedom of expression and objectivism.

Freedom of Expression and Free Flow of Information

The media are a vehicle for dissemination of information and reflection of citizens' opinions, as well as a medium to promote and achieve democracy. As a consequence, the media must be free to express its opinion (Molana, 2002).

Democratic regimes or governments elected by people are legitimate regimes. Their goal is to serve individuals and protect their freedom of expression. The right to be informed or the right to receive information is one of the main principles in promoting democracy and freedom of expression. Free flow of information cannot contribute effectively to a representative government without freedom of expression (Namakdoost Tehrani, 2004, p. 30).

Some analysts maintain that free information flows from free media. Free media calls for preparation of means to express different opinions and an ability to respond to different social demands.

The following are the characteristics of free media:

- Citizens must have equal rights and means to receive news and information.
- The press must not be censored.
- Media must have a free hand to collect information from related sources.
- There must be no hidden pressure about the choice of news and expression of opinions (Geranpayeh, 1999, p. 35).

Objectivism

Objectivism implies fairness and impartiality, which means correct reflection of the opinions of rival parties during a debate. Publishing the opinion of the opposing parties from a wrong source of news or from a single source (with a given goal) will be harmful. Such one-sided reporting might have destructive effects and will be dangerous from a legal point of view (Harris, 2002, p. 36).

Various factors such as proper words and features are needed for the report to be fair and impartial. The impression of the journalist and his method of choosing news are also responsible towards that end (Housman, 1996, p. 106). In relation to this, Perkins (2002) argues that by adhering to impartiality and maintenance of independence, we can stop the media or the reporter from supporting censure, government intervention, or serving the influence and interests of given political, commercial, ethnic, lingual, and religious groups or other interests and only work towards public interest.

Research Hypotheses

H1: IRIB TV does not observe freedom of expression principle in news coverage.

H2: IRIB TV does not observe objectivism principle in news coverage.

Method

In this study, a survey design was used to determine to what extent media ethics principles are employed for news coverage in Iran Television. This study was conducted at two universities including Tehran and Islamic Azad universities located in Tehran, capital of Iran. These locations were selected because most students studying social communication and journalism as well as those lecturers teaching social communication subjects and journalism were involved at these two universities. Since journalism and social communication lecturers and students were expected to have taken a critical approach towards media contents due to the nature of the course they teach and learn in, they were selected as a research sample.

The sample of this study consists of 231 journalism and social communication students, as well as 39 lecturers. The random sampling method was used to select for inclusion in the sample. The main instrument of data collection in the study was based on a questionnaire developed by researchers regarding universal journalism ethics principles.

Freedom of Expression and Free Flow of Information

In the current study four questions were used to scrutinize the extent of freedom of expression observed in IRIB TV's news coverage. The respondents were asked to rank items related to freedom of expression: (a) "To what extent is there hidden pressure to select the news and expression of opinions in IRIB TV?" and (b) "To what extent does IRIB TV censor news coverage?" among others. Participants were needed to demonstrate to what extent IRIB TV observes the media ethics principles, according to a five-point Likert scale ranging from: 1 = "very little," 2 = "little," 3 = "average," 4 = "much," and 5 = "very much."

Objectivism

To measure objectivism, three questions were asked: (a) "To what extent does IRIB TV give different parties the equal chances to express their ideas towards different issues?"; (b) "To what extent does IRIB TV regard neutrality (impartiality) in news coverage?"; and (c) "To what extent does IRIB TV have bias in news coverage?" Respondents were asked to mark to what extent IRIB TV regards these codes in news coverage and answers ranged from 1 = "very little" to 5 = "very much."

To determine the degree of samples' (students and lecturers) perceptions of observance of ethics principles on Iranian Television news, we utilized different kinds of statistical methods, including comparing average opinions, standard deviation to show how much variation there is from the average, and the T-test that assesses whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other (Delavar, 2003).

Results*Freedom of Expression*

Freedom of expression and free flow of information is a basic human principle which covers the right to receive and search for information. Freedom of expression cannot be achieved if media are not controlled by the public. Freedom of expression calls for several factors including lack of censure and refraining from secretly influencing the choice of news. One can assess the extent of observation of freedom of expression in the media by such factors.

To test Hypothesis One, we measured the positive points of all items related to freedom of expression after shaping the direction of the question. The results of statistical studies are reflected in Table 1.

As can be noted in Table 1, since the average opinions in all three cases is below 12, which is the artificial value of the average limit in 4 items, we can conclude that the opinion expressed by the respondents was below the average. Also we can assert that the research hypothesis was supported by the respondents and in the opinion of professors and students of communication, IRIB TV has not observed the principle of freedom of expression during news broadcasting.

Table 1 <i>Freedom of Expression</i>								
Respondents	Average Opinion	Standard Deviation	Case Value Comparison		Average Differ.	T Crisis Differ.	Degree of Freedom	Level of Significance
			Quality	Quantity				
Professors	6.5476	1.88	Average	12	-5.45	-18.69	41	.000
Students	7.9740	3.10	Average	12	-4.0	-19.72	230	.000
Sample Total	7.7546	2.99	Average	12	-4.24	-23.45	272	.000

Table 2 <i>Objectivism</i>								
Respondents	Average Opinion	Standard Deviation	Case Value Comparison		Average Differ.	T Crisis Differ.	Degree of Freedom	Level of Significance
			Quality	Quantity				
Professors	4.6905	1.2	Average	9	-4.3	22.5	41	.000
Students	5.8658	2.5	Average	9	-3.1	18.6	230	.000
Sample Total	5.6850	2.43	Average	9	-3.3	22.5	272	.000

Objectivism

To test Hypothesis Two, we measured the positive points of all items related to objectivism after shaping the direction of the question. The results of statistical studies are reflected in Table 2.

As can be noted in Table 2, since the average opinions in all three cases is below 9, which is the artificial value of the average limit in 3 items, we can conclude that the opinion expressed by the respondents was below the average. Also we can assert that the research hypothesis was supported by the respondents and in the opinion of professors and students of communication, IRIB TV has not observed the principle of objectivism during news broadcasting.

Suggestions

Freedom of expression and flow of information is considered one of the main human rights, and includes the right to receive, seek, and disseminate the information. This is never achieved without freedom of the press and by developing people-oriented communities. Freedom of expression can be measured by lack of censorship, and government non-interference in media content broadcasting. In this case, according to data collected, IRIB TV did not regard the freedom of expression in news coverage. Objectivism implies fair and impartial reporting of news, stories, and features. Following this code in news broadcasting can lead to increased media credibility. According to participants' ideas, IRIB TV did not observe objectivism in news reporting.

Here are some factors which can promote and institutionalize media ethics in IRIB TV:

Studying the philosophical frameworks of the media. The present sophisticated world has taught humanity to examine the deepest layers of opinions and study with much precision every aspect of an idea which is going to be introduced. Thus, we need to examine all the philosophical and ideological angles for the news framework and the origin of such ideologies. If ideas such as democracy, freedom of expression, human rights, and individual liberties are not yet clearly defined in some countries, it is because such subjects have not been examined on the national scale within the entire system.

Clear and fixed definition for media ethics and its consequences. For example, the words “national security” must not be altered in the least within a system of a government; if the definition of “national security” is changed, its national interests in that sphere must have been expanded or limited. If these words are defined they must be interpreted in such a manner that there would be a guarantee for their implementation. In fact the meaning of words must not shift according to individual opinions or the policies of a given party.

Writing codes or rules covering media ethics. Under the domain of written rules for the media and by putting emphasis on national and religious values in all fields in the media, especially news media, the media will be compelled to operate in a responsible manner. Identifying and formally recognizing the professional and ethical codes, formulated by the media and its officials and governmental departments, including the executive, the judiciary, and the legislative branches of the system (IRIB regulations are drafted and approved by these branches), and following such codes in long-term and short-term programs and policies, along with the execution of a judiciary verdict, and so on, are critical to a healthy and open media.

Avoiding ambiguity in values. Our ethical and religious values are clear and distinct in our principles and frameworks, but that which happens in human communities are scientific behaviours which are various in type and shape and each behaviour is judged by different tests and approaches. Since a slight behavioural change instigates different judgments and values we witness conflict in the values. For example, at the same time that the news positively influences the economy it might undermine the country’s policy. As such, these explicit and clear-cut principles may fall into the shadow of darkness and ambiguity. In every system applied ethics often faces such ambiguities. These ambiguities increase on such occasions when we are faced with political, private, or group interests, or when economical and professional exigencies are expounded and engrossed by journalists.

Introducing and expanding a democratic media culture. To allow a democratic media to culminate, it is necessary for governments to devise a definite lawful and ethical framework to permit free flow of information that echoes different opinions in the media. Moreover, governments must allow everyone to seek information and let the media enjoy freedom of expression, immune from the influence of the statesmen who dictate policies. In the meantime, the government and political parties must not use the media as their mouthpiece to secure political, economic, private, and factional interests.

National media should study and translate international media codes and charters and the codes of other countries and adapt them to the country's media code by taking into account the country's culture and religious and ideological values.

Media outlets should expand pluralism in all fields in the media, especially news, because lack of pluralism will make media managers become despotic and allow domination by government or other private interests.

Promoting the expertise level of media staff. Lack of expertise is the result of insufficient education and poor professional background in the media.

Critical to an open media is the establishment of a non-state professional monitoring body, composed of media professors and field experts, in order to monitor the performance of the media and encourage them to observe media ethics in various fields, particularly in relation to news broadcasting.

We should encourage the development of private TV channels to enhance fair competition among different media outlets and encourage them to observe media ethics as strictly as possible.

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