

## **Media Ethics in Pakistan**

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**This is the right time that media owners, editors, practitioners and professional journalists should pay due attention to the issue and prepare a comprehensive code.**

**Media is regarded as eyes and ears of a society which not only serves as a watchdog but also provides credible information regarding important and newsworthy national and international events to enrich and strengthen the social fabric. Thus, the significant information through media plays a role of oxygen in social structure. If people do not know precisely what is happening around, they cannot become active citizens and play their meaningful part in the affairs of the country. It is hard to imagine of having real democracy or good governance without informed citizens. In any democratic dispensation, public opinion is required to develop freely and independently and journalists have a special responsibility in this regards. Mass media being an educator, informer, reformer, guide and a trend-setter is more accountable. Hence it should follow ethics strictly.**

**Ethics is a branch of philosophy and its purpose is to describe moral sentiment as well as to establish norms for good and fair behaviour. Boundaries of ethics are drawn in different dimensions in different societies. In Pakistan, the ethical dimensions are partly similar to those of other countries having different demographic, religious and social backgrounds. Media ethics kept the journalism and cultural industries with the responsibility to perform for the betterment of society.**

**Until 2002, the only television channels that operated in Pakistan were the state-run PTV and a couple of its specialized news and entertainment subsidiaries. Media in Pakistan purposely followed the ethical lines to disseminate the credible information.**

**which caused to the gradual rise in the maturity in the attitude of the people towards politics and the social responsibility. However, the last decade has witnessed a great shift in the media policy of the government due to opening of a lot of private television channels. In line with the global trends, the government also introduced the new media technologies in the country resulting in a rapid growth of broadcast media in Pakistan.**

**With the passage of time it has become diverse and touching the topics which once were considered forbidden for public consumption.**

**But in the same vein, media in Pakistan has become an industry in the real sense of the word and is following its own agenda. With the opening up of the media industry, the unrestrained news channels are involved in a mad race of breaking news syndrome in order to gain the audience and popularity instead of delivering correct information to**

viewers. Today, prominent news channels are broadcasting uncensored violence, crime stories, live coverage of terrorist attacks while compromising media ethics.

Commercial interest of media to generate revenue never let it to observe public service message time. News channels dramatize the event to make them saleable which is against media ethics. The TV anchors are losing their credibility as they are found biased and manipulate the issue most of the time, serving their owners or other specific stakeholders for petty gains. This practice is against the norms of journalism.

Sensitive issues regarding gender are highlighted in a vulgar way. Yellow journalism and inappropriate division of time for coverage of news event and personalities through broadcast media raised the question about media ethics. Issues that are more important for society and have to be dealt with the masses such as non-availability of potable water, loadshedding, public health, infrastructure, wages, poverty, unemployment, etc. are not pursued by the media properly to a point where a solution is eventually reached.

In November 2009, a Gallup Pakistan poll found that almost one-third of all Pakistanis (31 per cent) blame media for political instability in Pakistan. These findings have two important implications: first, media are creating confusion and chaos by distracting the public from the real issues; and second, by discrediting themselves with unconfirmed reports, members of media are undermining their own profession and ultimately freedom of press.

In Pakistan, Council of Pakistan Newspapers Editors, All Pakistan Newspapers Society and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists have developed code of ethics to follow. Similarly, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has developed rules to follow but implementation in this context is the weak link. Media in Pakistan is not fully mature yet.

At such stage it is very vital to prioritize the socio political health of the public through credible and newsworthy information and positive entertainment. We need to develop a code of ethics for the media so that it could serve as a watchdog in the society besides helping public form opinion about national and international issues through provision of authentic and verifiable debates.

The government always formulates a code of ethics through which it can control the media in its own favour. Press Council Ordinance and the PEMRA rules and regulations are obtrusive examples.

Similarly, the code of ethics drafted by the owners and broadcasters unnecessarily defends their rights. The working journalists are not giving any importance and the audience rights not secured. All the above-mentioned issues can be resolved through a code of ethics based on a broadest possible consensus among all stakeholders. This is the right time that media

owners, editors, practitioners and professional journalists should pay due attention to the issue and prepare a comprehensive code. This code should be acceptable for all parties including audience. Further Pakistan's media community should adopt the international practice of defining standards that it shall always strive to attain.

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) has drafted a code of ethics for Pakistani media which is based upon the belief that fair, balanced and independent journalism is essential for good governance, effective public administration and the capacity of people in Pakistan to achieve genuine democracy and peace. The code recognizes that the creation of a tolerant, peaceful and just society depends upon the freedom of citizens to have access to responsible journalism through media that respect principles of pluralism and diversity.

For this code to be effective, journalism and media policy in Pakistan must be guided by the following principles:

That media, whatever the mode of dissemination, are independent, tolerant and reflect diversity of opinion enabling full democratic exchange within and among all communities, whether based on geography, ethnic origins, religious belief or language;

That laws defend and protect the rights of journalists and the rights of all citizens to freedom of information and the right to know;

That there is respect for decent working and professional conditions, through legally enforceable employment rights and appropriate regulations that guarantee editorial independence and recognition of the profession of journalism;

That there is credible and effective peer accountability through self-regulation by journalists and media professionals that will promote editorial independence and high standards of accuracy, reliability, and quality in media.

#### **Code of Ethics (Draft)**

Journalism is a profession based upon commitment to principles of honesty, fairness, credibility and respect for the truth.

- 1. A journalist is obliged to uphold the highest professional and ethical standards and shall at all times defend the principle of freedom of the press and media.**
- 2. A journalist shall ensure that information he/she provides is fair, accurate and not subject to falsification, distortion, inappropriate selection, misrepresentation or any form of censorship.**
- 3. A journalist shall avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as fact.**

- 4. A journalist shall protect confidential sources of information.**
- 5. A journalist shall not distort or suppress the truth for commercial, institutional or other special interests.**
- 6. A journalist shall not accept personal favours, bribes, inducements, nor shall he/she allow any other factor pertaining to his/her own person to influence the performance of his/her professional duties.**
- 7. A journalist shall disclose any potential conflict of interest where they involve financial gain or political affiliations.**
- 8. A journalist shall mention a person's age, sex, race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation only if this information is strictly relevant. A journalist shall neither originate nor process material, which incites discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred.**
- 9. A journalist shall not take prior advantage of information gained in the course of his/her professional duties for private gain.**
- 10. A journalist shall obtain information, data, photographs, and illustrations only by straightforward means. The use of other means can be justified only by overriding considerations of the public interest. A journalist is entitled to exercise a personal conscientious objection to the use of such means.**
- 11. A journalist shall avoid intrusion into private life, grief or distress, except when there are overriding considerations of public interest.**
- 12. A journalist shall not exceed the limits of ethical caution and fair comment because of time constraints or to gain competitive advantage.**
- 13. A journalist shall not glorify the perpetrators of illegitimate acts of violence committed under any garb or cause, including honour and religion.**
- 14. A journalist shall never indulge in plagiarism. Using or passing off the works of another as one's own and without crediting the source is a serious ethical offence. Commercial interest of media to generate revenue never let it to observe public service message time. News channels dramatize the event to make them saleable which is against media ethics.**
- 15. A journalist shall strive to ensure that his writing or broadcast contains no discriminatory material or comment based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, age, sex, marital status or physical or mental handicap.**

- 16. A journalist shall respect and uphold principles of gender equality both in performance of his/her professional duties and in his/her relations with fellow journalists. A journalist shall not discriminate and shall avoid sex-role stereotyping and exploitation in his/her work.**
- 17. A journalist, while reporting on communal, ethnic, or sectarian violence shall not identify victims by race, ethnicity or sect unless it is in the public interest. When this is the case he/she shall ensure that information is not presented in any manner, which may incite hatred or social disharmony.**
- 18. A journalist, when reporting on sectarian or communal disturbance, including broadcast media, shall be aware of the danger of publishing images (or words) that may incite public discontent and anger.**
- 19. A journalist shall not publish or broadcast extreme images of violence, mutilation, corpses or victims of tragedy irrespective of the cause unless it is necessary in the public interest.**
- 20. A journalist shall respect the rights and needs of vulnerable members of society including women, children, marginalized communities and people suffering from disability.**
- 21. A journalist shall not identify or photograph minor children, infants who are the offspring of sexual abuse, forcible marriage or illicit sexual union, or where they are victims of trafficking or forcible drafting into conflict.**
- 22. A journalist shall always be conscious of the need for safety and shall take no action that endangers themselves or their colleagues in their work.**
- 23. A journalist shall at all times respect other journalists and shall defend journalists where they suffer discrimination or are victimized for the exercise of their profession.**
- 24. A journalist shall respect the public right to know and shall always act quickly to correct errors of fact or omission.**
- 25. A journalist shall honour the decisions of the Media Complaints Commission.**

**Media stakeholders in Pakistan collectively need to reassess the role of media in society and come up with a collective will for compliance on the code of conduct for journalists of the print and electronic media. Such measures will not only bring a positive change in Pakistani society but will also strengthen media itself and bring more institutional credibility.**

**The infancy period of Pakistani media is almost over and senior journalists, concerned government officials and society as a whole should play their part in making media more vibrant and torch-bearer of truthfulness while keeping in the societal norms and traditions.**

**Freedom to hold opinion and free expression are fundamental for a thriving democracy. This right is recognized by various international instruments including the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Right to information (RTI) is a primary element to hold an opinion and independent and diverse media also play central role in informing people and enabling them to hold their opinion. Nevertheless, an enabling legal framework to: promote and protect people's right to information; curb/ restrict secretive practices of the government; and ensure independence and diversity of media is essential.**

**In Pakistan, right to freedom of expression and speech had been recognized by the Constitutions of 1956 and 1962. The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 includes a specific provision (Article 19) on freedom of expression and speech. However, right to information was recognized as a constitutional right through Eighteenth Amendment in 2010. Nevertheless, the information and media milieu in Pakistan have completely changed during past decade. At present more than 90 private satellite television channels and over 140 private FM radio stations are operating in the country. Eighteenth Amendment has made right to information a constitutional right of the citizens of Pakistan. Prior to this, freedom of information laws were in place in Baluchistan, Sindh and at federal level. However, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab Provinces enacted right to information laws in their respective jurisdictions in 2013 after the Eighteenth Amendment.**

**As discussed above, media landscape of Pakistan has witnessed an exponential growth during past thirteen years. This expansion in media market can largely be attributed, along with various other factors, to the promulgation of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance 2002. The government also promulgated a number of other media related laws such as the Press Council Ordinance, 2002, the Defamation Ordinance, 2002 and the Press, Newspaper, News Agencies and Books Registration Ordinance, 2002. In addition to these laws, the Newspaper Employees (Conditions of Services) Act, 1973 was also in existence. Besides these media specific laws, various other laws– such as the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860, the Telegraph Act 1885, the Post Office Act, 1898, the Contempt of Court Act, 1973, and the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-Organization) Act, 1996 –also contain provisions dealing with the free expression and media freedom.**

**In my opinion all media related laws, specifically PEMRA, Press Council, Defamation and Press Registration laws, predate the Eighteenth Amendment – Article 19A – of the Constitution. Except a few piecemeal provisions, all these laws have very little reference to the right to information or freedom of information in these laws. Many of these laws**

**require their respective public bodies to publish their annual report and make them public. One of the objectives of the PEMRA law was to “ensure accountability, transparency and good governance by optimizing the free flow of information.” Wherever, these laws provide for free flow of information, the provisions are either conditional or subject to certain limitations. Many pre-twentieth century laws such as Telecom Act, Telegraph Act, Post Office Act and Pakistan Penal Code are more tilted towards maintaining the secrecy than the transparency.**

**In view of these findings, the report suggests to revisit all these laws to align them with the Eighteenth Amendment – Article 19A – of the Constitution. The provisions restricting access to information in other laws, such as Telecom Act, Telegraph Act, Post Office Act and PPC, must be revisited and changed to reflect the spirit of Article 19A of the Constitutions. The provisions relating to transparency and flow of information – annual reports etc., - in these laws must be highlighted and enforced.**

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