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Media Ethics in the Age of New Media

The media and communication industry has undergone significant changes in the last two decades due the emergence and the rapid developments in new media. The power of new media in attracting ordinary citizens and changing their behavioral patterns is a critical topic in the contemporary digital media environment. The development of new media has raised new concerns and ideas on media ethics and freedom of the press in a global context. This paper discusses how the forms of new media have influenced to media ethics and its consequences in the digital era.

New Media is the term for the many different forms of electronic communication that are made possible through the use of computer technology. The term is in relation to "old" media forms, such as print newspapers and magazines that are static representations of text and graphics. The term New Media has been defined in both technological and socio-cultural approaches. New Media can be simply defined as the complex set of interactions between new technologies and established media forms. Del Sola Polle, I (1983)

suggests new media will facilitate a positive media world, a wider range of media texts can be produced that meet the needs of many more groups in society. It provides individual citizens with the capacity to produce and publicize texts themselves. This facilitates the growth of different media representations.

The key characteristics of New Media

- Digitality
- Interactivity
- Hypertextuality
- Dispersal
- Virtuality

The strong capabilities of these characteristics have shaped new media as a powerful phenomenon. Lister, Dovey (2003) argues that the emergence of new media influenced in building an important era in human life. They describe the new media development as a new techno-cultural transformation. The critical discourse about the role of new media can be divided in two main arguments. The supporting argument for the new media is that it has enhanced pluralism and democracy, by giving a voice and a platform for expression to the marginalized citizens around the world. The opposing argument is that new media forms have no control and responsibility. That has led not only to unethical user behavior patterns, but also unethical media practices among journalists.

Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the general nature of morals and specific moral choices that people make in relationships with others. Media ethics is the study and application of Journalistic standards of conduct and moral choices. Media ethics usually links a system of values and principles with choices that must be made in day to day media work and assignments Dennis. E, Merril, J (2001). Accuracy, verification and objectivity are the key elements while accountability, impartiality and public interest are also among the ethical factors that journalists should take into serious consideration in their professional practice. The emergence and development of newer forms of media always change the nature of media ethics. The worldwide expansion of television as an audio visual medium generated a new ethical concerns compared to the ethics in print and radio media. The

developments of new media forms like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and blogs have raised new questions about the ethics in the media.

The MacArthur foundation (2009) identified four key elements in the discussion of media ethics in the new media landscape.

- Identity
- Privacy
- Ownership and Authorship
- Credibility

Identity

Theorists of human development have described identity formation as the major task of adolescence; at least in modern Western societies (Erikson 1968). Media plays a key role in forming identity of the individuals since their childhood. The identity formation is facilitated by self-expression, self-reflection and feedback from others. The nature of the new media forms has inheritably given more opportunities to individuals on their social identity than any other media. When a teenager is listening to a radio program, it might have an effect on him and his attitudes related to the identity. Comparatively, a Facebook user can express his views while keeping close eye on the ideas and attitudes of his fellow mates. The user's identity formed on how he wants others to see him and the real person can't be seen in his virtual identity on Facebook. The ethical concern in the identity formation of new media is that it completely contrasts to the real life and the online identity. People login to their facebook profile, twitter feed or blog site to express their views, sexual identities and feeling about their relationships. The socialization process continues with the influence of new media, creating persons with both online and offline identity.

Privacy

Privacy is the state or condition of being free from being observed or disturbed by other people. The limitations and nature of the privacy depends on the socio-cultural conditions of the specific society. The Internet has brought new concerns about privacy in an age where computers can permanently store records of everything, "where every online photo, status update, Twitter post and blog entry by and about us can be stored forever," (Rosen, 2001). Worldwide, there are over 950 million Facebook users and 500

million out of that are daily users. Approximately 300 million Photos uploaded daily while 510 comments are posted, 293,000 statuses are updated in every second. On the other hand 500 million have been registered on Twitter and 55 million tweets are posted daily(source :www.zephoria.com). This shows how people share their personal photos, views and information in new media. The private life of individuals is not a demanding content in newspapers, radio and television. The presentation of gossips and personal information of celebrities in newspapers, radio and television is also considered unethical by the various code of ethics for journalists. When it comes to new media, private life and secret information of not only of celebrities, even of the ordinary citizens are shared without any limitations. The founder of the Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg once said that Facebook changed the notions of privacy. Zuckerberg stated that people are sharing their personal information, photos which they earlier thought highly personal. Public is the new private (weber, 2006). The boundaries of the private and public life have been blurred as a result of online social communities.

Authorship and Ownership

The authorship and ownership of the media is a visible thing in the mainstream media. A television station should obtain licenses and get registered in order to operate locally or internationally. If anyone interested, he can easily find the owner of the media institution. On the other hand, most television programs, newspaper articles presented with the names of the author or the creator of the content, unless the media organization is responsible for the content of the program. The ownership and authorship are well defined concepts in the media industry in a legally accepted environment. The main ethical concerns in new media is that the ownership and authorship of new media forms are not clear. The author's name of a blog site can be changed or hide deceiving the reader. Then the question comes as who is responsible for the blog or the news site which operates anonymously.

The enforcement of copyright laws against illegal new media practices is a difficult process due to the widespread nature of new media. Once a song or an e book was shared on Facebook without the consent of the author, it is a very difficult task to find out the first person who shared it.

Plagiarism is another major concern as people can copy and paste content while hiding their identities online. The duplicate versions of original creations have become more popular than the originals as a result of the ownership and authorship issues. The opposite argument is that citizens can express their highly controversial political ideologies and views as authorities are not in a position to track them like they did in newspapers or television. The ethical concerns of authorship and ownership arise with new media, should be discussed in a broader perspective as mere comparison between old media and new media is not sufficient for a better new media policy.

Credibility

Credibility is the objective and subjective components of the believability of a source or message. Perception of the audience regarding the credibility of media content has been a major research area in the last few decades. The lack of credibility is a criticism both print and electronic media have been facing over the years. Credibility is considered as a main ethical concern in the new media environment. The reason for that is anyone can write, post or comment on blogs, Facebook and Twitter which would be accepted by millions around the world in no time. For example, an edited photo uploaded by an ordinary user on Facebook might ended up creating ethical tensions among communities. An online survey conducted by the Fort foundation and Belo Interactive, found out that majority are more likely to consider an internet news source credible if it is associated with a print or broadcast organizations they are familiar with. This clearly shows that people have a belief that print and electronic media institutions are more credible than the new media platforms which are operated alone. Though there are questions about the credibility of new media, users have the opportunity to find the truth by comparing information online. A news item or a story you see on a friend's Facebook profile can be googled and find out whether the information is true or false. Glasher (2011) reckons increased transparency in new media can encourage trust. According to him, exposing your background and biases allows consumers to know their source, thereby promoting trust. Lack of credibility is not only an issue related to new media as still there are criticisms against newspapers for being not credible in presenting news and information. The credibility issues of new media should be addressed by

educating and enhancing media literacy of the users who have not been exposed to theoretical aspects of media and communication.

Citizen Journalism and Media Ethics

"When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism" Rosen (2005). Citizen journalism can be simply defined as the process in which ordinary citizens are playing an active role in collecting, reporting and disseminating information. The main criticism against citizen journalism is that can anyone be a journalist without any educational or professional background in Journalism? Are their professional and unprofessional journalists? On the other hand citizen journalists played a leading role than the professionals attached to media organizations in Tsunami disaster (2004) and London tube bombs (2005) providing true pictures and accurate stories few seconds after incidents.

Merril (2004) argues that if internet is a new kind of Journalism, or an extension of Journalism, are internet users members of the press? Will they be covered by accepted media laws and ethics? The ethical concern is that whether citizens are responsible for the content and their behavior as citizen journalists. There is a possibility of shutting down or deleting a blog, social media platform after presenting highly controversial information. Removing the original site does not mean that the content is completely vanished as the possibility of the content going viral on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is very high.

A photo of a Sri Lankan father carrying his dead son after a LTTE bomb was shown in local television channels and shared in internet in 2006. Seven years later the same photo was used by the diaspora communities in their social media platforms to criticize Lankan government against human rights violations. Later, the same picture was telecast on NDTV saying the son was killed by Lankan troops. The meaning of the photo was completely changed on social media and ended up presenting it in mainstream media.

Dennis (2004) argues that the most news organizations offer too little content and depth in to the news and current affairs. Instead of the broad and

shallow approach of a traditional newspaper, new media can offer a compact news menu followed by as much depth and as many alternative sources as people want. However, the important fact is that the in depth reporting should be conducted in an ethical and credible manner. Citizen Journalism is a great platform for the marginalized groups, communities to express their views. The outcome of citizen journalism will be more productive and significant if it operates according to the accepted ethical norms of the media.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that new media has brought a paradigm shift to the media and communication industry. New media have created newer opportunities and broaden the space for the public to disseminate and gain information. New Media is more democratic and community based compared to the old media. However, the role of new media have raised ethical issues due to the lack of proper guidance and regulation. Censorship is not a solution to enhance the quality of new media as the technology can surpass censorship easily than any other media. Enhancing media literacy is very important in order to have an ethical new media environment. Media literacy will take the user in to a stage where he knows what should be and what should not be published. Direct state control would not be an answer and government should facilitate bloggers, facebook communities to engage in transparent discussion to enforce their own regulations and to develop a code of ethics for new media users. New Media has the potential to lead citizen in a very positive and democratic manner if it operates ethically and transparently.

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