
Media Law And Ethics

Mass media is one of the biggest perception builders in the world today. Whether it is through television, newspapers or cinema, media has the power to take control of a person's perception regarding a certain person or incident. This is a very huge responsibility and the media is bound to follow certain ethical guidelines in order to exercise their duty of showcasing the truth as it is, in a responsible manner. Every country has a different set of media ethics and values to follow in order for its media to gain credibility amongst its people. However, there are many instances when media goes overboard and sensationalises news to get higher ratings and advertisements amongst other things. One such case, where media played a sensationalist role and led to a lot of misinformation was the car crash of Princess Diana. The media took control of the narrative and claimed that the accident took place due to a car chase between Princess Diana's and a pack of paparazzi. The investigations into the matter and cause of death led to the reveal that the media was far from the truth and had reported the event in an irresponsible manner. Another similar case of such a violation, whereby an event is reported inaccurately or the nature of reporting propagates feelings of discontent and upheaval in society, is from Pakistan. It is the case of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The reporting by media around the assassination was highly false and mostly fabricated. The nature of reporting also led to mass riots across the whole country for more than 24 hours. If not handled appropriately, the power that media possesses can indeed be deadly.

Princess Diana was a Royal Family member. She was the first wife of Prince Charles. She was a social activist and was known for her charity work, particularly for the HIV/AIDS cause. She was killed in a car crash in Paris on 31st August 1997. The media reported various incidents regarding her death which created massive uncertainty amongst people in Britain. The media reported that the car crash was caused due to a paparazzi chasing Diana's car and the driver, Henri Paul, losing control of the car as a result. MSNBC's initial broadcast of the news claimed that the car crashed due to a paparazzi chase that ended tragically. Other reports claimed it to be a conspiracy of the Royal Family itself as Diana was allegedly secretly involved with Egyptian billionaire Dodi Fayed, who also died with her in the car crash. All this media speculation led to humiliation of not only the Royal Family but also Diana. The media outcry about the paparazzi chases led to cases being filed against the photographers who were merely doing their job. As police investigations began, the French and police confirmed that the accident was caused by the driver Henri Paul, who was driving under the influence of alcohol and prescription drugs. This investigation came to closure in 2008 when both the paparazzi and driver were returned verdicts of 'unlawful killing'. The media created frenzy shaped the public opinion in such a way that it almost led to prosecution of an innocent photographer. The media should have been responsible and not broken the story unless it was not sure and should've also thought about the consequences this could have. The Royal Family was also criticised by the media heavily for their reaction towards Diana's death which didn't seem to be one of mourning. This further led to more speculations from the media which went as far as saying that the Royal Family was involved in the death of Diana. Such reports tarnished the reputation of the Royal Family as Diana was beloved to many people across the world. The media could have avoided creating so much speculation if they waited on a solid report which they could confirm as the whole truth.

A similar scenario can be found in the case of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi in 2007. Benazir Bhutto was a Pakistani politician and head leader of Pakistan's liberal and secular Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). She was also Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister in 1988 and served twice as PM between 1988 to 1996. She was assassinated upon her return to Pakistan from exile in 2007 for the upcoming general elections in 2008. Her death was reported across news channels and papers all over Pakistan. The media reporting was sensationalist and provocative to a point where it caused mass hysteria amongst the people of the nation, especially Sindh, which was Bhutto's constituency. Media reported various accounts of her death. Some claimed she was killed by a suicide blast, others say she was killed by a gunshot wound, some also say she hit her head on the jeep while ducking from the blast and gunshot. The media speculations were random and all over the place. Every news channel had their version of the story and was portraying it as authentic. Some even went on to blame Bhutto's own husband for staging this attack in order to ensure the party won the upcoming elections. This barrage of unverified and unethical reporting led to a lot of hysteria and speculation amongst people. A formal investigation was launched into the affair. The investigative team discovered that the attack was staged by the Taliban, who were already threatening various other politicians including Bhutto. The investigation of the murder, which brought along the likes of the Scotland Yard to Pakistan, concluded that Bhutto died of a head fracture sustained while ducking from the bomb blast. The report negated everything the media had been perpetrating since the very beginning. The media panics also led to panic on the streets where city's like Karachi were completely halted by goons and mobs that tore apart the city in all the chaos. Again the media failed to address the news in a responsible manner and instead, led to instigating people to come on the streets and create havoc. This case truly highlights the power of the media and if used in a negative manner, the havoc it can bring down upon a society and its people.

Both these cases violate the same set of media ethical laws. If these violations were avoided and the media were more responsible, things might have turned out different in both situations. The media clearly violated the laws of 'Aspersions (means 'spread harmful charges against someone attack reputation of a person with harmful allegations'. However a fair comment does not mean aspersions)' and 'Propaganda (means dissemination of any doctrine rumor or selective information to promote one sided views on any controversial issue, unless in public interest and importance)'. Propaganda (In talk shows the licensee must ensure the following:

Information being provided is not false or distorted and relevant facts are not suppressed for commercial, institutional or special purposes. News should clearly be distinguished from commentary opinions and analysis).

If these violations were contained, the aftermath of both these tragic incidents would have been more civil and just. Media has a huge role in shaping the way mankind lives its lives, however media owners should always be mindful of their surroundings and should report an event as it is without added sensationalism or propagation of a particular agenda.

Citations:

1. <https://youtu.be/9chSLKEU1IY>
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42409374>
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