

Ethics and Indian Television Content Portrayals:
A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Ethics in communication approaches by the Indian electronic media, particularly television about its content on air are a heated debate in the country today. Why do channels adopt “devious” ways to lure the viewers? How fair are channels conducting media trials? Is judiciary in India unable to address that TV channels should take up head-on? Does political ownership of Channels affect ethical practices? Do artistes on programs pass-off comments that affect social order? Do channels air programs without prior permissions or copyrights from the artistes or organizers? What is the degree of professionalism and credibility among viewers? The theoretical framework of the study is based on the macroscopic theory of Political Economy. This critical study examines case studies of program content drawn from different pan-India channels, satellite or cable. This study focuses on media ethics and effects on society.

Keywords: Commercialization; Credibility; Portrayal; Program Content; Professional Ethics

Résumé:

Les approches éthiques en communication des médias électroniques indiens, particulièrement la télévision sur le contenu à l'antenne, font partie d'un important débat en Inde aujourd'hui. Pourquoi les canaux adoptent-ils des pratiques sournaises pour conserver la rétention de leurs audiences? Est-ce que les canaux qui mènent des procès sont équitables? Est-ce que la justice indienne est incapable de soulever les enjeux que les canaux de télévision se doivent de défendre ouvertement? Est-ce que les propriétaires politiques des canaux ont un effet sur les pratiques éthiques? Est-ce que les artistes qui apparaissent sur les programmes peuvent passer des commentaires qui influence l'ordre social? Est-ce que les canaux diffusent des programmes sans permission ou droit d'auteurs des artistes et organisateurs? Quel est le degré de professionnalisme et crédibilité de l'audience? Pour répondre à ces questions, cette étude emprunte le cadre théorique macroscopique de l'économie politique. Cette étude critique examine les études de cas de contenu de programmes de différents canaux indiens, satellites ou cable. Cet étude met l'emphase sur l'éthique des médias et son effet sur la société.

Mots-clés: Commercialisation; Contenu de programmes; Crédibilité; Éthique professionnelle; Représentation

Introduction

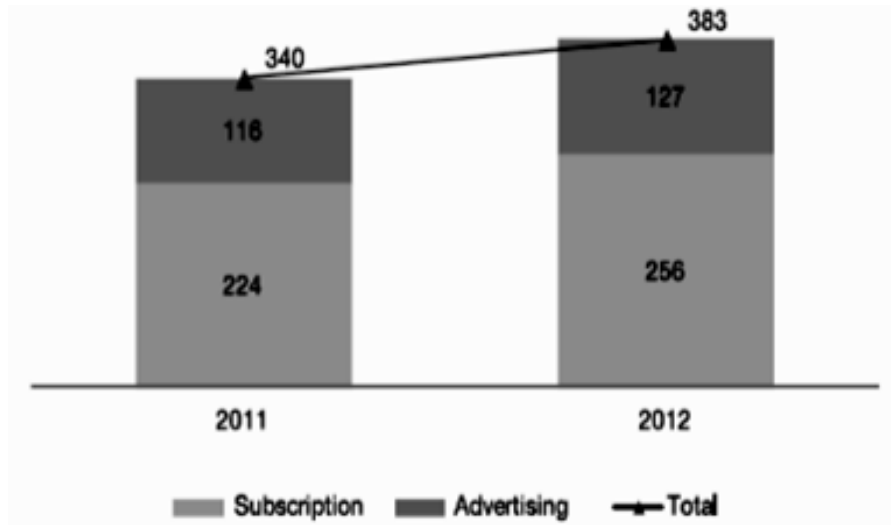
The status of Indian media is stable even after the recession years of the 21st century. There has been enormous media growth revenue in the last one and half decade. In fact, the revenues increased from 805 billion rupees in 2011 to 965 billion rupees in 2012, an average year-on-year growth of 17.5% and with a CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 18% (PwC, 2013). In spite of the lukewarm governmental and industrial participation, digitization of media production and output has given the required growth momentum and has taken the Indian Entertainment and Media (E&M) sector to newer heights. Achieving innovation in the sector is a challenge. The challenge also arises due to the balancing of business of propositions by guarding it with the expectations of the society. Consumer-centric media practices is among the chief factors for the ensured and steady progress, thus bringing the factor of ethics amidst hectic competition in the projection and portrayal of media messages and treatment of its contents. The society is the testifying school of media practices. There is a continuous change in consumer behaviour. The masses consuming the media messages demand the ethical way from the media since the different and varied sections of the large society need to be satisfied, if not appeased. This also ensures bridging the gap between the consumers and the E&M providers.

From the PwC analysis: 2013, television in India continues to be the largest E&M sector contributing 40% of the revenue by end of 2012. The analysis also forecasts the continued domination with 39% of the revenue even during 2017. It is to be noted that the subscription revenue is much more than the advertising revenue (see *Figure 1*). A key trend is also that there

is a steady growth in the pay TV subscribers. There is also the lack of effective audience measurement systems in spite of TVTs (Television Viewership in Thousands) and GRPs (Gross Rating Points) recently put in place. All these point to the consumers playing a major role in influencing the progress of the television industry.

Figure 1: TV Subscription and Advertising Revenues in Billion Rupees in 2011 and 2012

Source: Industry reports and PwC India Analysis



In spite of this very promising growth and access of television for India, the issues of extreme commercialization have made it compromise its ethical standards. Studies have proved that it is an era of experimentation for Indian television. In the process, the programme contents have inputs that affect the fabric of Indian society, propagating certain moral values.

The news channels emerging in India have resorted to exaggeration of news. Often unrelated content that needed to be ignored is blown out of proportion causing disruption among the population. Apparently, it is for fast raising the TRPs. A friction between TV journalists and political administrators has also surfaced including media as a messiah of morality for Indian society bearing cultural conflicts and glorification of crime and reality shows.

Ethics

In a preliminary way, ethics may be regarded as the study which arises from the human capacity to choose among values (Peston, 2007: 7). In the understanding of ethics, as long as the effects of the practice, rightly or otherwise, to the individual who practices it, the agreement goes to that length, but if the effects of the practices of an individual is negative on a society or sections of people, then the ethical considerations of his/her practice is questionable, referring “greed is good” (Ibid: 10). Peston continues to point out that ethics as philosophical reflection is never enough but must interact with a realistic and accurate interpretation of social conditions and the prospects for their transformation. Ethical claims “prescribe” rather than “describe”; they are concerned with how people ought to behave and suggest how social and individual behaviour

can be improved. Applied ethics draws on philosophical ethics but emerges more from an interdisciplinary field including the social sciences.

The term “ethics” is derived from the Greek ethos via ethikos (literally “habit” or “custom”) connoting the “usage”, “character”, “moral rules”, as a branch of philosophy it pertains to the analysis of concepts such as “duty”, “obligations”, “right”, and “wrong”. It is an inquiry into the nature of morality and its foundations; the way in which human conduct is ordered, guided and appraised (Bilimoria, Prabhu & Sharma, 2007: 3). Ethics, or moral philosophy, asks basic questions about the good life, about what is better and worse, about whether there is any objective right and wrong, and how we know it if there is (MacKinnon, 2013). The ancient Greek philosopher Plato thought that ethics could be taught, he wrote “All evil is ignorance” (Ibid: 13).

The views of Karl Marx on ethics had impact on societies. Applied ethics, like any other disciplines of application oriented type is meant to apply ethical theory to situations in life. Applied ethics can be useful in the fields of Engineering, environment, geography, public service as well as business. For instance, business ethics is such a form with professional approach which measures the ethical principles or problems that arise in a business environment. It is only by the end of 20th century that the keenness in business ethics increased, both in corporate sector and among the academic circles. This study has the objective to help resolve the conflict between business ethics and the public service ethics of media practices.

Code of Ethics

Although several codes have been promulgated over the decades by, on and for almost every media in India, it has been difficult to practically realize the essence of those codes in reality. Both the Codes drawn by the autonomous agencies or those within the media have remained confined to books missing to impress the aggressive functioning of media, particularly that of television. The Codes have been just another top-down type of approach which, by the time abided by the last person in the profession has got worn out or become redundant. The practicing professionals have often found the codes cryptic to comprehend or tough to abide with, due to the inherent vagrancies in the Calling. Otherwise, a host of sting operations successfully revealing the misdeeds of the culprits would not have been possible in the sub-continent.

Just like the self-imposed guidelines, the codes more than being drawn, has to get engrained in the practitioners by training. Thus, laying serious emphasis on media literacy and media education also acquires importance.

In the Country Report published by Open Society Foundations in its publication of 15 December 2012, the following excerpts find relevance to this study:

In December 2010, The Hindu newspaper reported about an ethical breach that involved the English news channel CNN-IBN and the tweets it aired for a prime-time program on “should lobbying be legalized”? Later, the channel apologized to its viewers on its website for its bordering on unethical approach in the same.

(Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012, December 15: 66)

Ethics & Electronic Media

From the same Country Report on Indian media, the literature pointing to the relevance of this study and in its purview as depicted hereunder.

There are numerous instances where media activism has successfully forced authorities to act on issues uncovered by news reportage. But the glut of news outlets has put pressure on journalists to be first with the news—one of the dimensions of the “breaking news” syndrome. So, in case of stories based on sting operations, i.e., the secretly recorded or videoed assignments, the noticeable increase in unsubstantiated or unbalanced reportage has tarnished the image of the profession, adding to the concerns about the ethics and values prevailing in the private-sector media. . . . Invasion of privacy and other ethical issues involved have become crucial in the case of sting operations, easily enabled by technology. . . . Multiple media formats and the increased number of media organizations have put pressure on journalists to be first with the news. . . . Media organizations have allegedly blackmailed companies by asking for advertisements in exchange for blocking out negative news from their media properties, for instance in the Zee-Jindal case, where Zee channel officials demanded large sums of money to stop the telecast of adverse news against Jindal company. . . . In the case of newspapers, the 30 year-old statutory body Press Council of India can only admonish or censure news outlets even in cases of violation of journalistic ethics.

(Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2012, December 15: 7, 67, 78, 110, 134)

Further, media analysts argue that casual approach to content development will lead to audience effects such as producing “ordinary” people. This could lead to a possibly accumulating liability of human resource to the society or nation over a period of time (Gross, Katz & Ruby, 2003).

Ethics in communication approaches by the electronic media about its content on air are a heated debate in India today. The contents, their treatment and the timings or the ways in which they are broadcast are in dubious distinction with the various sections of audiences in Indian masses. Alan Albarran (2011) states that ethical decision-making in the electronic media can be a complicated and challenging process involving many aspects of an organization and different types of practitioners. Hence it appears the ethical aspects differ from one network or channel to another. There is a need to bridge organizational ethics with that of personal ethics. For instance, ethical approach in management of staff is also among some of the indirect parameters having bearing upon content generation and portrayals. Policies regulating in self manner or by control have yielded meagre results in making the media professionals stick to ethics. Many innovated broadcast regulatory bodies like the NBA (News Broadcasters Association), IBF (Indian Broadcasting Foundation) or the BCCC (Broadcast Content Complaints Council) have constantly refocusing to achieve desired results in maintaining ethical functioning of Indian television.

Conflict of interests as to what are the ethical approaches is discussed both at authority level and at the public domain. Ethics acquire value when there are differences in the ideologies adhered to by the various stakeholders in the domain. Further those ideologies will clash with each other doing much harm to the systems than progress or bringing comfort to the stakeholders. It is the order of nature that societies of the nations are subject to change. The changes in proclivities of societies are attributed to the entering of new technologies, mixing of

ances, migration of population in search of comfortable living, changing political leadership along with changed ideologies and so on. Changing societies also bring in frequent debates on ethics as the principles of living change and thus media functioning will have to slightly accommodate to societal expectations and also balance its practices.

The study of ethics will help us by providing the means to make difficult moral choices that confront us in our professional and personal lives. Professional associations of doctors, psychologists or lawyers enforce upon themselves a code of ethics. Ethics bring in responsibility. For instance, ethical practice of electronic media vouches for social responsibility and gate-keeper function. Principles are embedded in ethics too. It is not that electronic media including television do not follow ethics or adopt ethical principles in their day to day functioning, policy making, practices and programs. But the extremity of commercialization of entire media network of India including the race for TRPs has made it often slip or even fall prey in following ethics, particularly when it comes to churning out programme content.

The Problem in Content Portrayals

How much so ever the television business has become extremely commercialized, Indian sub-continent cannot afford to take in misleading public opinion, taking audience for granted or wasting the air time for profit motives. The program content has to be put to some degree of screening by experts or professionals of TV houses as it would get miscommunicated in the vast visually less literate sections of the huge Indian populace which is also a complex amalgamation of traditional, transitional, and modern societies with multi-lingual, multi-cultural hierarchy ridden communities spread over vast geography and different climatic conditions. Adding to it, the bombardment from the skies by the transnational television has the content which is much alien to the aboriginal practices and lifestyles of Indian terrains. The audience measurements continue to be hesitantly accepted by the masses due to its dubious distinction.

Thus the agenda setting by channel owners on program content to manoeuvre the political, economic or social situations only for their quick profits is highly questionable. Even the intentions of the product advertisers from mega business sectors in dictating terms about the program content is intolerable as it amounts to vested interests as against the national interest or mass support. The summary of the game is that Indian TV houses lack professionalism of running a television media which should be as per books and principles laid down by the forefathers about the primary purposes and objectives of media functioning. This non-professional approach could have also stemmed from lack of proper training and media education among the practitioners. Much of quacks entering the field have made television industry heavily losing on credibility steadily day by day. Just because the Indian land is vast and so to increase access and reach, mere proliferation of channels or boost in audio-visual content cannot guarantee any sort of healthy social engineering or contribution to the economic growth of the nation.

In some of the regional channels, there is a rampant unofficial coverage of a new trend of cultural activities conducted by intellectual artistes in the name of joke or entertainment only to get away with huge profits by airing them without prior permissions or copyrights from the artistes or organizers. Many such devious ways of production has made channels often slip on professionalism and steadily lose on credibility among viewers.

Conflict of Ethics in Electronic Communication

Indian research on ethical functioning of electronic media are very less in number and also needs more studies that address the current scenario and in great depth. However, some globally relevant works provide insights to the ethical approach to electronic media functioning.

Advertising professional Tony Schwartz feels that since truth is a print ethic, not a standard for ethical behaviour in electronic communication, critics and regulatory agencies should assess the ethics not by standards of truth and clarity of the content but by evaluating effects on receivers (Johannesen, 2008). There is no universally accepted code of ethics in the media industries. An organization may adopt its own code of ethics, written or implied. Wherever group or organizational ethics codes exist, conflicts may arise between the organizational approach and the individual's moral beliefs. Regardless of the organization, management attempts to balance the needs of the market and the public in the ethical situations that media organizations confront on a daily basis (David, 2008).

The theoretical framework of the study is of the macroscopic theory of political economy. This study also subscribes to the normative theory of deontology about ethics which supports only the act and not its consequence of good or bad. Deontology theory promotes binding to the rules, in this case the rules of a TV channel, more than being accountable to societal effects after the program.

Political economy theorists consider only the larger picture of systematic order in society. They also firmly propagate and support the political ownership of media and holding of economy through such ownerships. But when it comes to accountability of the portrayals of programs over the politically owned channels with negative aspects of societal effects, the theorists miss out on taking the responsibility for their propositions, hence the question of ethics come in here. Moreover, these theorists agree on freezing of the status quo of an issue while portrayed over the politically owned TV channels, only to gain mileage monetarily or for increased visibility. But if two non-political private ownerships of TV channels are beaming content on a same issue, it would amount to healthier competition unlike the politically owned ones. This study puts the onus on the professionals to be accountable for their acts. With deontology theory of ethics as back end and political economy theory as the front end theory, this theoretical work has critical study as methodology supported by case studies of program content drawn from different pan-India channels, satellite or cable.

The Pertinent Questions

Many questions arise when the factor of ethics is considered for television programs. Why do channels resort to adopt devious ways to lure the viewers and hold them for a long time? How fair are channels conducting media trials? Is judiciary in India unable to address the issues that TV channels should take up head-on? Does political ownership of Channels affect ethical practices? Do artistes on programs pass-off comments that affect social order? Do channels undertake coverage unofficially and air the content making profits? This study is to analyze and find answers to the above.

This is a critical study supported by case studies of program content drawn from pan-India channels, satellite or cable. Limiting itself to television content, the significance of the study is that the studies on media ethics and effects on society need more of academic criticism in contrast to the studies on commercial aspects, technological strengths and media market

studies. The research aspect should go beyond real-time examples to search for the root of the problem in the psycho-social profile of the trained practitioners and policy makers. Thus this study supports the researchers to continue more such studies in future, thus adding to media literature. The study finds applications in the professional bodies and practitioners to maintain healthy relation with society. The study contributes in providing insights to intricate approaches of alternatives in knitting the program justifying the societal needs and the valuable timelines.

Current Critical Findings

Even as Article 19(1)a of Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, it is clearly stated that the freedom thus granted is “not absolute” and is subject to reasonable restrictions, restraint, guarding public order and uphold sovereignty & security of the nation.

On the other hand, media should respect the voice of the people. But it seldom means that people who are the audiences of media could be exploited for the business gains of the media. TV Channels often resort to adopt devious ways to lure the viewers and hold them for longer time because of the competition to retain higher TRPs. Panellists as well as moderators over a programme often resort to character assassination or propaganda to get popular overnight among the viewers, power holders and sometimes even among the authorities. Such Panellists or moderating journalists also go without anybody brought to book ultimately.

In the set agenda of channels for content portrayals, the new generation is targeted. Converting the advantage of the demographic dividend in India, television advertisements have often kept the teenaged, the early youth and women under focus. The product industry is usurping the program agenda through advertising. In the past media practices of India, the glamour point was attached to films alone. Now, it is shifting to TV industry. With the middle class increasing and rising in aspirations and demands, Acting as a vocation in TV has become the order of the day. Fashionable and modernized life style ridden with materialistic instincts is boosted by television messages. The self-esteem of the youth is raised but at the cost of collective living. With television activity integrating the mobile phone and other convergent, user-friendly, consumer friendly technologies, it has given more negative than the positive developments for society through the recent years.

Media often conducts trial on the statements of an individual, engulfs a lot of time, energy and effort on electronic media ultimately without any outcome. With political ownerships of TV channels, the fairness in which the channels conduct media trials is dubious. Programme content on a crime slot has inputs which tend to intrude upon the functioning of the police or the law & order. Deviation from factuality, the guessing game about who the culprit is, suspecting the most non-obvious, all of it misleads the investigating agencies.

Also, the concept of political ownership needs to be understood in multiple angles. The Public Service Media in India like the All India Radio and Doordarshan come under the autonomous body Prasar Bharati Corporation of India. PSMs that were committed for development had already suffered due to lack of autonomy, lack of interest not taken by respective governments. Though autonomy is a boon to the PSMs, it also brought in the practices of privatization such as mobilising revenue for self-sustenance, precedence of revenue over public service and thus has resulted in weakening the public service propositions, wherein almost every political party has a newspaper or a TV channel concentrating on vested interests and commercial ventures. Thus, attempt to instil privatized functioning of PSMs also has hampered the committed motives of progress. The various divisions of the Government of India's Ministry

of Information & Broadcasting are virtually arrested or made dysfunctional due to onslaught of private media functioning posing severe impediments in several dimensions.

Because the disposals of cases are slow, such a weakness is banked upon by the channels to undertake media trials. Due to the dissonance in the ideologies between polity and media, the political ownership of TV channels tend to affect ethical practices of media. Many youth artistes or resource persons appearing on programs of different channels lack visual literacy or social responsibility perspectives and thus pass off comments that might affect social order. The channels also coax the artistes to open up beyond normal and make sweeping statements or derogatory comments about a situation or person.

What Prevails

In many regional channels of India, children are used in programs to extreme extents. Due to commercial instincts, their artistic abilities are exploited beyond a stretch agonising them and leading to dire consequences such as emotional upheavals, psychological aberrations and so on. A channel had to undergo a forced closure on Indian Independence day due to such an extreme practice.

In the judiciary, sufficient scope of media laws is available and they are quite strong. But it is only that very few people take the content of media very seriously and also question in the court of law. Only if cases come before the court of law, it could look into it. There are several precedences of court verdicts directing the media not to violate the law regarding children or women. Thus Indian law is ready to face any consequences.

Another dimension is of controlling the media through law directly. Though there are some lapses or lacunae in the media functioning, a danger before any media is that drafting of media laws only to control the media may affect the independent and non-partial functioning of media. It is known that media is playing a major role in moulding public opinion, throwing a lot of light on scandals, good in investigating or questioning the political moves. Communication experts and media professionals do not appreciate the Government to amend the laws to control media because it could lead to the exploitation of media by respective Governments. An alternative is to strengthen the regulations that could channelize media for effective functioning.

The ongoing episodes of reality shows like the Big Boss in different avatars on many different channels, both regional and national are hardly near to real life sentiments and the audiences are steadily becoming disillusioned about the slant in verdicts of the shows. Media laws are missing on addressing the excessive expressions due to these episodes.

Invasion of Privacy

Camera coverage or footages of the TV channels are accomplished without protocols, permissions or proper procedures. Though public places and domains are ground for the cameras, since the shots can go intimate, close up and zoom to remote spots, there is high tendency of invasion of privacy, defamation or scan of obscene content only to titillate the audience by broadcasting them. Many TV channels dare to undertake coverage of government offices and officials unofficially and also air the content without prior permissions from concerned persons or authorities only with intentions of making quick profits and create sensation. Thus, the social responsibility is in question.

Excessive Expressions

There are accused expressions on by panellists about corruption, bribe, misappropriation or mal-admission without any alibi or proof. In some of the regional channels, there is a rampant unofficial coverage of a new trend of cultural activities conducted by intellectual artistes in the name of joke or entertainment only to get away with huge profits by airing them without prior permissions or copyrights from the artistes or organizers.

Extreme Competition

Under intense competition among the channels for increased TRPs, the program content through the slots are frequently resorting to adopt devious ways to lure the viewers and hold them for longer time. Examples of content like making the resource persons resorting to character assassination and propaganda without anybody brought to book has amounted to mere hounding behind people for no reason. While the Judiciary is finding it difficult, the media tends to infringe on legalities.

- Dire need to have fast track courts
- Indifference of the public to file cases
- Insufficient or inaccurate knowledge of law

Accused expressions are made on corruption, bribe, misappropriation or mal-admission, often without any alibi or proof. The participation in programs has resulted in character assassination and propaganda, finally coming out without anybody brought to book by law, nobody being punished, or even with the media justifying the hounding behind such individuals in question.

Political ownership of TV in India has given rise to a lot of unethical moves wherein neglecting the directions of election commission of India- autonomous body to guard code of ethics on elections. For instance, election symbols are used as an ingredient in most programs indirectly influencing a viewer to vote in their behalf; examples of such election symbols—the Rising Sun is the election symbol of the DMK party; two leaves is the symbol of the AIADMK party, both from the state of Tamil Nadu.

In different states, there is a new trend of conducting cultural activities in the name of joking entertainment. In the channels of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Kerala, the academicians and poets address huge audiences in the name of jokes making people to laugh. There are many campaigns throughout India such as laughing clubs, positive in objectives. When such entertainment programs are organized in public, media people go and shoot the footage without the permission of either the artistes or organizers, use those footages on air for months together, many a times even without official investments while getting away with huge profits. Organizations are happy due to the mileage of name and fame they get. Also, the artistes are behind popularity. In this situation, none question the issues of copyright or the value for efforts.

News channels repeat telecast of a same theme or news or beat round the bush is much of time wasting tactics. It is also that the viewers are taken for a ride sometimes. In fact, viewers are taken for granted by the news channels which results in perpetuating visual illiteracy among audience in the long run. Even in news capsule, same news content appears four times- once in the headlines, then in the detailed version, in the recap time and in the repeated telecast. Even the footages are extremely repeated.

FM radio programs are ridden with the RJs letting go of their loose tongue often with slangs, snubbing the image of individuals, organizations, language or culture thus taking public taste for granted.

Adaptations for Better Future

The media should respect the voice of the people however, in the guise of respecting the opinion the gatekeeper function and social responsibility should not be forgotten. Political ownership of media has resulted in many negative aspects, sometimes affecting the fabric of democracy in turn weakening the Public Service Media systems. Complementary functioning of different media is imminent in these times of extreme competition. Imitated programme genres like reality shows cannot afford to misguide the innocent populace. Owing to intricate cultural contexts of Indian races, invasion of privacy is a very complex issue and hence Indian media should tread the path very carefully, not merely practicing on the lines of developed nations.

Democracy does not mean excessive expression. Extreme emotions in program content are uncalled for at the cost of objective portrayal. Extreme commercial competition among different Indian media will only result in damaging the social fabric of the society in turn destruction of moral values and culture. Recruitment of thorough professionals into media houses as against quacks should be made stringent.

Conclusion

From the study, it is to conclude that there is a need for comprehensive self-regulation draft by thorough professionals with only a crosscheck from authorities. It also calls for unstinted professionalism with good training background about the field. There should be strong screening of the aspirants entering into television media about their socio-cultural background and psychological proclivities. Removal of personal ideologies to suit organizational or community ideologies in the program producers is a must. Ensuring value basis in the practices and substance of content on television channels will help the portrayals credible. Extended studies on the topic undertaken here will add to the studies and practices in communication and contribute increasingly to Media Literature.

Over the decades and centuries, functioning of media with time tested practices have all the more made it important to emulate and also to exuberate the ethical approach in order to be effective and accepted by people with enhanced credibility. Complementary functioning between the media and among cognate agencies of the nation, avoidance of excessive expression, controlled commercialization, better serious research for programme content, stringent recruitment processes, auto-respect for codes and statutes among the practitioners, nourishment of Public Service Media and care for oncoming generation are the direly needed outcomes.

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