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**GLOBAL JOURNALISM ETHICS:
AFGHANISTAN EXPRESS AND CHARLIE HEBDO**

by

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Abstract: *Post globalization or modernism, the world has witnessed integral changes in its social, economic and cultural structures as well as in its theoretical, philosophical and ethical textures. With the onset of transnational communication and revolution of information communication technology, the practice of journalism and mediated communication has also witnessed integral changes in its skill-set, practice and nature of audience. The problem arises in formulating the changes of ethical norms keeping in terms with the evolution of journalism and media. Various experts around the world have put together necessary efforts for long to explore and establish global journalism ethics. One such eminent scholar, Herman Wasserman in his article Global Journalism Ethics has discussed various facets in realizing such a universal approach. In the background of the deliberations developed by Wasserman, the present article offers a study of two events related with Charlie Hedbo magazine and The Afghanistan Express newspaper. Further the article explores the ethical problematics surrounding the two events and extending Wasserman's conceptual propositions presents a triadic model of essential ethical elements that function as barriers for universal singularity of journalistic ethical norms. In an attempt to extend elucidation for the contesting issues, the article also offers various possibilities as foundational requirements for establishing global journalism ethics.*

Keywords: *ethics, journalism, international media, charliehebdo, afghanistan express, global journalism ethics,*

Introduction: The Events

When the usual editorial meeting started at around 11:30am on 7th January, 2015 in Charlie Hebdo's office of Paris, two gunmen forcefully entered and killed 12 employees including Stéphane Charbonnier, the editor-in-chief of the tabloid (BBC, 2015). The responsibility of the attack was later taken by the Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen (AlJazeera, 2015). In 2013 Stéphane Charbonnier or Charb's name was included in the list of Wanted Dead or Alive in Inspire magazine reported to be published by Al-Qaeda in Arab Peninsula (Ward V. , 2015). The threat was issued due to the publication of satirical cartoons in Charlie Hebdo on Prophet Mohammed. Mr. Charbonnier was living under police protection after a fire-bombing on Charlie Hebdo office in 2011, just before the publication of its issue titled Charia Hebdo which satirically named Prophet Mohammed as the guest-editor along with publishing several satirical cartoons of the Prophet (BBC, 2011).

In the morning of 15th October, 2014 the readers of The Afghanistan Express in Kabul opened the newspaper carrying an opinion piece by A. J. Ahwar titled *The Islam of the Taliban and ISIS* (Ahwar, 2014). Soon a widespread protest proliferated throughout the nation against the 'blasphemous' (KT, 2014) writing which challenged the goodwill and existence of God (Rasmussen, 2014). After several high profile meetings of the government officials, the newspaper's editor was arrested (MacKenzie, 2014). The paper soon published an open apology letter calling the publication of the article a 'technical mistake' and survived its existence (Afghanistan Express Management Team, 2014).

The Charlie Hebdo incident has witnessed world-wide condemnation with the rise of *Je suis Charlie* slogan and high global media attention (Martinson, 2015). The event of The Afghanistan Express found minor global media coverage and remained largely unnoticed. For the international audience the Charlie Hebdo incident offered another example of Islamic terrorism triggering global rage. However put together with the event of The Afghanistan Express which occurred less than three months before the Charlie Hebdo incident, it offers a peek into an unknown world which is culturally, socially and politically largely uncommunicated to the rest of the civilization.

The article here does not dwell on the Charlie Hebdo attack or the protest and punishments after the publication of the article in The Afghanistan Express; rather it considers the context that led to these events and thus explores the moral and ethical dimension of journalism in a post-globalized era. In reference to the events of Charlie Hebdo and The Afghanistan Express the

article explores various facets discussed by Herman Wasserman (2011) for global journalism ethics. Further extending, the article attempts to identify foundational requisites in forming and training ethics for journalists working after the world-wide revolution in information communication technology.

Global Journalism Ethics

Herman Wasserman (2011) in his article titled *Global Journalism Ethics* discussed the changing ethical dimension in the dynamic field of modern journalism. The narrative text produced earlier for regional or national consumption has traversed over its geographical boundaries and now available for international audience. The same audience has now access to different narratives of the same event as available from various media outlets worldwide. This has drastically changed the nature of audience for any form of media. Beyond narrative, technique and skill, this demands a new set of ethical norms applicable not only for national or regional journalistic practices but for global practices.

Here comes the question of universality versus relativity in the applicability of single set of ethical norms at international level. The Afghanistan Express and Charlie Hebdo cases illustrated this collapse of uniformity in ethical practices of multi-cultural journalism. How the people of a religious group, who were infuriated with a single column challenging the goodwill of God and Prophet Mohammed written by one of their own in one of their national newspapers, would react to the series of satirical cartoons on Prophet Mohammed and Islam published by a foreign media house even after knowing the harm these are causing to their religious sentiment? The article does not attempt here to probe into the course of the action or to criticize or justify it anyway, but raises much more integral question of ethical sensitivity in multi-cultural journalistic practices.

The Afghan Express with its tagline *the voice of a more hopeful generation* started functioning in 2012 (Afghanistan Express). A. J. Ahwar is a lawyer and human rights activist spent some time abroad to complete his education. His wife, Marina Zaffari has been one of the earliest woman television reporters in Afghanistan who covered politics for a national news channel. In face of rising threats they left the country and sought asylum in Netherlands (Orner, 2013). When Ahwar's article was published it was denounced as politically motivated by the newspaper organization itself in their apology letter (Afghanistan Express Management Team, 2014). Sediqullah Tawhidi, the head of Media Watch in Afghanistan, explained that the article had been used to justify the situation for claiming asylum in Netherlands by the author and this had not been a freedom of press issue (MacKenzie, 2014). Considering whatever might be the motive in publishing the article, the event does not change that the article offended a section of the society.

Charlie Hebdo has always been a 'satirical...secular, political' publication which claims itself as 'an angry magazine', 'a punch in the face' (Charlie Hebdo). In their own words, the magazine has positioned itself "against those who try to stop us thinking, against those who fear imagination; against those who don't like us to laugh" (Charlie Hebdo). After its 2006 publication depicting

Prophet Mohammed, the magazine witnessed legal suits by Islamic organizations for racist attack on Islam(Charlie Hebdo). The editor was acquitted of the charges in the court proceeding and the magazine carried forth more poignant satires depicting Prophet Mohammed in its issues published in 2011 (BBC, 2011)and in 2012(Vinocur & Reuters, 2012).This though was criticized by French government(Sayare & Clark, 2012), but was defended by the editor-in-chief of the magazine(Simons, 2012). Charlie Hebdo both in its court cases and in civil society enjoyed a strong support on the clause of freedom of speech and expression.

The Problematics

The dominating concept of freedom of speech and freedom of expression has its origin in West, particularly in European enlightenment (Smith & Torres, 2006). FawazTurki(2012)wrote in a column for Arab News, “Just as diplomatic relations, based on mutual trust, are crucial to a sound global dialogue of cultures, so are interfaith relations, based on open-mindedness, equally crucial to a peaceful world.So where does the issue of free speech come into the equation?” In this context it becomes important what Wasserman (2011)calledinclusive transformation of global ethics. He showed in his essay that the normative ethics of Aristotle’s and Confucius’ virtue theory, Kant’s deontological theory, Mill’s and Bentham’s utilitarianism theory, social contractalism and even ethics of care all have their origin in the western or northern concept of ethics.

The Buddhist ethical philosophy and concept of Ubuntu in African ethics, as Wasserman(2011) pointed out, lie outside the dominant discourse and construction of global ethical norms. Interestingly Wasserman used the example of cartoons of Prophet Muhammed published in 2005 in JyllandsPosten, a Danish newspaper and the resulting international crisis. With this reference he raised an alarming need for understanding and including Islamic ethical philosophy in global journalistic ethical practices. In the same context, it is important to note that the Indian ethical tradition is also highly neglected even in training courses for journalists in India. The philosophical concept of Dharma, *realpolitik*of Kautilya, the ethical explorations of Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo remain largely disregarded in the development of global journalistic ethical norms(Tandon, 2003; Ranganathan, 2007; Merril, 2011).

Further there also lack theoretical and philosophical exploration and active debate of the concept of journalism ethics. The reference point of journalistic ethics has fallen down to the mere codes of ethics and normative guidelines developed by various organizations world-wide. As long as philosophical and theoretical deliberations with keen awareness of social implications are not positioned as prime concern of ethical practices and training, the ethical evolution remains largely hindered.

Thus the issues of developing global journalism ethics can be foundina triadicrelational dimensionof the following elements –

- Cultural relativism
- Non-inclusive tendency
- Atheoretical nature

The three elements co-exist in a complex whole where one influences the other as well as replaces and strengthens. The graphical representation of this triadic relation can thus be as follows –

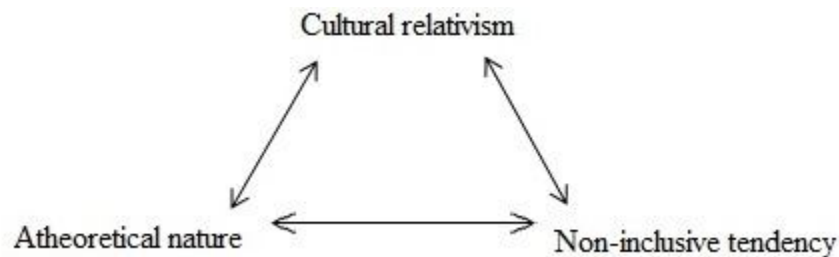


Diagram 1. Triadic relational complex of global journalistic ethical issues

In case of Charlie Hebdo the issue of cultural relativism can be identified in terms of religious representation. The magazine's choice of subject matter and its presentation triggered differential reactions from various interpretative communities (Lindolf, 1988). The subject matter belonging to a particular culture created negative reaction from certain section of that culture. After repeated attempts to restrict such practice the intensity of the grievance grew manifold as seen in various trials faced by the magazine (Charlie Hebdo). Charlie Hebdo by self-declaration used satire to provoke and change (Grimson, 2015). This tradition of journalism has many supporters world-wide who not only stood on street with *Je suis Charlie* placards but regularly purchased the magazine. Here comes another set of interpretative community for whom the Charlie Hebdo satire is much appreciated. Charlie Hebdo also defended itself in carrying forth the French tradition and class of satire (Piet, 2015). However it is interesting to notice that as Charlie Hebdo team criticized misinterpretation of their cartoons by those who lack awareness of French tradition of satire (Charlie Hebdo, 2015) the same can be applied for the magazine which lacked the awareness of Islamic tradition of representation of Prophet Muhammed. This then becomes an apparent instance of cultural relativism and the challenge faced by multi-cultural journalism in post-globalized world of instant international communication. In case of the Afghan Express it becomes evident that even in the same religious and national identity there exist different interpretative communities for whom the same message can have two different ethical justifications. This presents the issue of cultural relativism in a world where hybridity of culture created any singular identity almost impossible.

This leads to the second issue of non-inclusive tendency of global ethical practices. The publication of cartoons in Charlie Hebdo was not out of ignorance but out of a deliberate stance

as defended long by the magazine. However the global outcry to protect freedom of expression after the 2015 incident showed the lack of awareness of long standing battles between the magazine and Islamic organizations as well as of ethical sensitivity of the issue(Maussen, 2015). The protest as long as have been against the terrorist attack, it fell under the larger socio-political issue; but when the protest was to protect the freedom of press the question that simultaneously arises is on the awareness of the gravity of the harm caused against certain religious faith. The hegemonic effect of western liberalism and individualistic rights blurs the existence and functioning of other socio-political ethical practices. With global audience being aware of press freedom but little aware of social texture and religious sentiments of Islamic nations(Wasserman, 2011), the western liberal concepts gain much more public support and thus the strength of public opinion. The ethical understanding of global audience is the result of the dominant discourse on global culture and global ethics which as seen earlier ignores the multiple ethical discourse and practices. It is easier for people around the globe to understand and stand united against the attack on freedom of press after Charlie Hebdo event, than to understand the attack against the cultural sensibilities of a religious group. This is the hegemonic exercise resulting from the dominant discourse. This non-inclusive tendency thus becomes another important factor in developing a global ethical standard of journalism.

This brings to the other issue of global ethics, its atheoretical nature. The discourse of global journalistic ethics is largely centered on normative understanding, rather philosophical and theoretical one(Wasserman, 2011). Audience, journalists and other media personnel are vigilant on code of ethics and rights of press and individuals; however their perceptual development of ethical issues does not follow explorative path challenging the established order. Journalistic ethics has largely been following certain norms rather than imbibing the essence internally. The lack of theoretical discourse on ethics has failed to internalize the need of ethical practices to a large extent, triggering innumerable unethical practices in global journalism(SPJ). The incident of Charlie Hebdo illustrates multi-layered complex whole of the triadic elements that operated in practice. Failure in realizing the complexity of the issue is the manifestation of lack of theoretical understanding of ethics. As theoretical exploration becomes essential in journalistic practices, it immediately calls for inclusive nature in discussing ethical theories and philosophies of the world. This provides opportunity as to inter-weave the journalistic ethics with socio-cultural ethical understanding which are inseparable in practice. The theoretical discourse, against the list of Do's and Don'ts of journalistic ethics, provides higher emphasis on connecting the ethical practices at social and cultural levels reducing the issues of cultural relativism as well as non-inclusive tendency. Thus the triadic elements are inter-related and inter-dependent in establishing the global journalistic ethics.

The Possibilities

A.J. Ahwar in writing the article called for a social change which is the same intention Charlie Hebdo team had in publishing the cartoons. Charlie Hebdo criticized the extremism as Ahwar

criticized the killing of innocents. Both Ahwar and Charlie Hebdo were doing something that has long been praised as function of journalism for being the agent of social change. However even the benevolent intention could not pacify the outbursts these witnessed. Also it is important to consider that these events occurred with particular social and political backgrounds which are integral to the publications and their outcomes. Considering all these facets of the events, it becomes an important task to bridge the barriers and establish global journalism ethics that brings forth the social change without causing ethical uproar and damaging trust.

As seen in these two events, the audience differentiation should not anymore be considered solely based on national identity for international journalism. Different interpretative communities in a post-globalized world can reside in single national or social or religious category. The cultural relativism thus is much more compound in nature than ever before. However considering the contesting debate on the nature of ethical truth, particularly in post-modern era (Chandler, 1999), the universal implication of any journalistic ethics seems highly debatable. Even when positivists deny any moral truth and behavioral psychologists deny the possibility of ethics, the 'objective truth' for ethical standard is explored to fulfill the need of journalistic practice (Merril, 2011). The possibility of a way forward is presented long back by Trueblood (1963) when he stated, "when men differ about moral standards, it does not mean that they should give up the struggle to learn what they ought to do. Instead it means that they must go on thinking and learning from one another."

Wasserman and Ward have been regularly enquiring the possibilities of establishing global journalism ethics through their various interactions and publications (Wasserman & Rao, 2007; Wasserman & Rao, 2008; Ward S. J., 2010; Ward S. J., 2010; Ward & Wasserman, 2010; Ward & Wasserman, 2010; Ward & Wasserman, 2015). Ward (2005) along with credibility of truth and independence in the dynamic of global journalism ethics also emphasized the justified consequences for any journalistic practice as minimizing harm, providing public benefit, respect of privacy and the humanitarian nature of journalism as serving the global citizen, protecting civil and human rights, acting as watchdog over authorities along with being simultaneously accountable. Mathew Charles (2014) studied the early inception of international journalism ethics at the classroom set-up for journalism students. He denounced the practice of competition oriented provocative journalism along with focusing on 'their' human rights violation ignoring 'ours', demonization with focusing on them, others and enemies and focusing on the immediate rather long-term structural solutions.

In this evolution of global journalism ethics, both the Afghanistan Express and Charlie Hebdo along with many other journalists around the globe require to reconsider their messages keeping in mind the new ethical demands for multi-cultural communication. It thus becomes immensely important how change is fetched along with what change is fetched in multi-cultural journalism practices. It becomes equally essential to change the conservatism with harmful practices as to change the liberalism with hegemonic impact. However considering the global reach of messages and cultural diversities in interpreting the messages, it is essential to be aware of and

practice the journalistic ethics that has changed in post-globalized multi-cultural world of instant international communication. The changes that Charlie Hebdo and A. J. Ahwarspoke of require bridging the cultural diversity with reason and sensitivity that function as foundation for developing world-wide media ethics. Wasserman's (2011) conceptualization of issues and the triadic elements of cultural relativism, inclusiveness and theoretical basethus stand as important factors in establishing global journalism ethics.

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