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TRUTH, ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRACY: THE POWER OF THE MEDIA ETHICS

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Introduction

Media ethics form the backbone of a responsible press, shaping its role as a pillar of democracy. In democratic societies, the media serves as a bridge between the government and the public, providing citizens with critical information needed to make informed decisions. By adhering to ethical standards—such as truthfulness, accountability, impartiality, and respect for privacy—journalists uphold values that empower citizens and strengthen democratic processes. Ethical journalism is essential for fostering public trust, particularly in an era where misinformation can easily distort public understanding. The commitment to truthfulness ensures that the media does not just report but verifies and contextualizes information, allowing audiences to form accurate perceptions of complex issues. Accountability, on the other hand, enables citizens to trust that the media will correct errors and provide transparency in its operations, reinforcing public confidence in news sources. In addition, ethical journalism supports democratic engagement by holding power to account. Journalists who act independently from corporate, political, or other external influences protect the integrity of their reporting, which in turn upholds democratic checks and balances. Investigative journalism, backed by ethical standards, reveals corruption and injustices, encouraging transparency and accountability among those in power. Moreover, media ethics foster inclusivity by encouraging fair and balanced coverage of marginalized voices and diverse perspectives. By highlighting social issues and amplifying underrepresented voices, ethical media promotes social justice and civic participation. This inclusivity not only deepens public understanding but also promotes democratic values of equality and representation. In sum, the role of media ethics in democracy cannot be overstated. Ethical journalism sustains a free press, nurtures public discourse, and ensures that the media remains a tool for the public good rather than a vehicle for private interests. By prioritizing principles of truth, fairness, and integrity, ethical journalism strengthens democracy, fosters an informed and engaged citizenry, and holds power to account.

Understanding Media Ethics:

Media ethics is a set of principles that aim to regulate the conduct of journalists, media professionals, and organizations, helping them to make responsible and fair decisions that respect the public and uphold democracy. Given the immense power of media to shape public opinion, media ethics serves as a crucial safeguard to ensure that this influence is used positively, with integrity, and in the public interest. At its core, media ethics balances two fundamental ideals: freedom of expression and accountability. Freedom of expression empowers the media to report news and share diverse perspectives, a fundamental component of any democratic society. Yet, this freedom comes with the responsibility to avoid harm, misinformation, and disrespect toward individuals or groups. Media ethics advocates for a respectful and accurate portrayal of events, people, and ideas, and it pushes against sensationalism, invasion of privacy, and spreading falsehoods for commercial or political gain.

The ethical responsibilities of media include:

- 1. Accuracy and Fairness:** Ethical journalism prioritizes accuracy, ensuring that facts are verified before being shared. Fairness requires presenting stories without bias, which fosters credibility and public trust.
- 2. Accountability and Transparency:** Media professionals are encouraged to own their errors and issue corrections when necessary. Transparency regarding sources, conflicts of interest, and motivations helps audiences understand the context of the news and trust its authenticity.
- 3. Minimizing Harm:** Ethical media seeks to prevent causing unnecessary harm, particularly to vulnerable groups. This principle calls for sensitivity in cases involving personal tragedy, crime victims, and minors.
- 4. Privacy and Consent:** Respecting individuals' right to privacy is central to media ethics. Journalists often face ethical dilemmas where public interest may warrant certain disclosures, but they must weigh these against the right to privacy and avoid sensationalizing private matters.
- 5. Public Accountability:** Media should provide a platform for community voices and reflect societal diversity. Ensuring representation of all segments of society can strengthen public trust and engagement.¹

¹ Sc Hudson, M. The Sociology of News 2d ed. (W.W. Norton & Company 2003)

- 6. Supporting Democratic Values:** Ethical media practices support the values that uphold democracy, like transparency, informed citizenship, and constructive dialogue. By providing unbiased, fact-based information, the media empowers citizens to make informed decisions and participate actively in their societies.

Core Ethical Principles in Media

The core ethical principles in media serve as foundational guidelines that journalists use to navigate the complex responsibilities and ethical dilemmas they often encounter. These principles not only ensure the credibility of media institutions but also build public trust, thereby sustaining journalism's role in a democratic society. Here's an elaboration on each principle:

Truthfulness and Accuracy: Truthfulness and accuracy are pillars of journalistic integrity. Journalists have a duty to report information honestly, and this requires them to rigorously gather and verify facts before publication. Truthfulness goes beyond merely stating facts; it involves avoiding distortions and presenting information in a way that's fair and clear. Accuracy is also about context—facts must be placed within a broader narrative that prevents misinterpretation. Journalists must not selectively omit details or exaggerate aspects of a story, as this can mislead the audience. By prioritizing truthfulness, journalists allow readers to draw informed conclusions based on a well-rounded understanding of events.

Impartiality and Fairness: Impartiality requires journalists to avoid biases and provide balanced coverage, giving fair consideration to all relevant perspectives. This principle ensures that reporting is not swayed by personal opinions, favouritism, or external pressures. Fairness, meanwhile, means treating sources and subjects with respect and avoiding prejudicial language or tone. Journalists must ask themselves how coverage may impact the people involved in a story, especially vulnerable individuals, and consider whether it offers a complete and fair view of events. Practicing impartiality and fairness helps prevent misrepresentation and fosters a media landscape where audiences can access a diversity of viewpoints.²

Independence: Independence is the commitment of journalists to remain free from outside

² Curran, J., & Securance, J., & Seaton, J. Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain 8th ed. (Routledge 2020).aton, J. Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain 8th ed. (Routledge 2020)

influence, whether it is from political bodies, corporate interests, or advertisers. Journalists must actively avoid conflicts of interest that may compromise their integrity or the credibility of their work. For example, if a journalist has financial ties to a company, they should not report on that company's activities to avoid perceived bias. Independence empowers journalists to pursue the truth without fear of repercussions, and by doing so, they can maintain the public's trust. It also ensures that media outlets are seen as reliable sources, separate from any agenda other than the honest reporting of news.

Accountability and Transparency: Accountability in journalism means taking responsibility for one's actions, decisions, and the information shared with the public. When journalists make errors, they should acknowledge and correct them promptly. Accountability is often demonstrated through corrections, retractions, or even clarifications that offer readers context and insights into how a story was reported. Transparency, on the other hand, involves being open about journalistic practices, such as the sources of information, methods used to verify details, or the ethical considerations that shaped the story. By being transparent, media outlets foster trust with their audience, helping them understand the complexities and rigor of the journalistic process.

Respect for Privacy: Journalists are often tasked with reporting on issues of public interest, but they must weigh this against the right to personal privacy. Respect for privacy is about exercising restraint, especially in sensitive or personal matters that do not necessarily serve the public good if exposed. For example, details of a private individual's life may not be relevant in a story unless it directly impacts the issue at hand. Respecting privacy becomes particularly crucial when reporting on vulnerable populations, such as minors or victims of crime, where unwanted exposure can lead to lasting harm. In balancing the public's right to know with privacy, journalists protect individuals from undue intrusion while still serving the public interest.³

Minimization of Harm: Minimizing harm is an ethical guideline that underscores the responsibility journalists have to consider the consequences of their reporting. This principle encourages journalists to think carefully about the potential emotional and psychological impact of their stories. For instance, reporting on topics like violence, tragedy, or abuse may

³ Zeng (2021): Jing Zeng, "Algorithmic Anxiety in the Newsroom: An Editorial Perspective" 23(4) Journalism Practice 450 (2021).

require discretion to avoid causing further harm to those already affected. Minimization of harm also calls for sensitivity toward marginalized or vulnerable communities to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or stigmatization. By exercising caution and empathy, journalists fulfil their duty to inform while maintaining a commitment to humanity and compassion in their work. These core principles—truthfulness, impartiality, independence, accountability, privacy, and minimization of harm—form the ethical foundation for responsible journalism. Adhering to them helps journalists make decisions that respect both their professional integrity and the rights of the individuals they report on, while also serving the public's need for truthful and fair information.

Ethical Theories and Frameworks in Media

Ethical theories provide journalists with a foundation for making responsible and consistent decisions. They serve as frameworks that guide journalists when facing dilemmas, particularly in situations where competing interests and values must be balanced. While the ethical principles of truthfulness, accountability, and independence are universal in journalism, understanding various ethical theories provides deeper insights into why these principles matter and how to apply them in practice.

- 1. Deontological Ethics:** Deontological ethics, established by philosopher Immanuel Kant, is a duty-based approach that prioritizes adherence to ethical rules and principles over the outcomes of actions. This ethical framework emphasizes the inherent value of honesty, transparency, and adherence to professional obligations.⁴ Kant's categorical imperative suggests that actions are ethical if they are based on principles that one would want to become universal laws. For journalists, deontological ethics translates to strict adherence to journalistic standards, such as truthfulness and objectivity.

Application in Journalism: A journalist following deontological ethics would focus on reporting facts accurately and transparently, even if the outcome could harm their news organization or attract backlash. For instance, if a journalist uncovers facts about a corruption scandal involving influential public figures, deontological ethics would demand reporting the story despite potential consequences, such as legal challenges or loss of advertising revenue. Here, the journalist's duty to inform the public outweighs potential repercussions.

⁴ Zeng (2021): Jing Zeng, "Algorithmic Anxiety in the Newsroom: An Editorial Perspective" 23(4) Journalism Practice 450 (2021).

Challenges and Criticisms: While deontological ethics ensures consistency, it can be rigid and may not account for the nuances of every situation. For example, publishing certain sensitive information could result in harm to individuals or national security, raising questions about whether strict adherence to truth telling is always appropriate.

- 2. Consequentialism:** Consequentialism, notably utilitarianism, bases ethical decisions on evaluating the outcomes of an action. Rather than focusing on moral rules, consequentialism asks whether an action maximizes positive outcomes and minimizes harm. In journalism, a consequentialist approach would weigh the potential impact of publishing a story against possible harm, aiming to serve the greater good.

Application in Journalism: Consider a scenario where a journalist discovers sensitive information about an ongoing national security operation. Under consequentialism, the journalist might decide not to publish details that could endanger lives or compromise the operation, prioritizing the welfare of the public over the story itself. Similarly, during a public health crisis, journalists may choose to withhold information about specific patients to prevent unnecessary panic, as long as withholding it does not hinder the public's right to essential information.⁵

Challenges and Criticisms: One of the primary criticisms of consequentialism in journalism is that it can lead to justifying unethical actions if they appear to have beneficial outcomes. Additionally, predicting outcomes accurately can be challenging, especially in complex situations, which can lead journalists to make decisions based on assumptions rather than certain knowledge.

- 3. Virtue Ethics:** Virtue ethics, associated with the philosophy of Aristotle, centres on the character and integrity of the journalist rather than rigid rules or consequences. It encourages journalists to cultivate virtues such as honesty, courage, compassion, and fairness. This approach suggests that ethical journalism arises naturally when journalists commit to personal integrity and strive for moral excellence.

Application in Journalism: A journalist applying virtue ethics might approach a sensitive interview with empathy and respect, ensuring the interviewee's dignity is upheld. This approach often results in stories that are both insightful and respectful, as journalists who practice virtue ethics strive to embody virtues in their work. For example, a journalist reporting on a tragedy may avoid sensationalism, focusing instead on providing a balanced, respectful portrayal that honours the subjects and educates the

⁵ Buckingham (2020): David Buckingham, *The Media Education Manifesto* (Polity Press 2020).

public.

Challenges and Criticisms: Virtue ethics relies heavily on individual moral character, which can be subjective. This approach may lead to inconsistencies across different journalists, as interpretations of virtues like courage or empathy may vary. Additionally, virtue ethics can lack clear guidance in situations where virtues might conflict, such as when honesty clashes with the need to minimize harm.

The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press

The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press proposes that the media has an ethical duty to prioritize the public good, support democracy, and foster informed citizens. Originating from the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947, this theory argues that freedom of the press must be coupled with responsibility to society. Journalists, therefore, must balance the pursuit of newsworthiness with the needs and welfare of the public.

Application in Journalism: A journalist operating under this theory would seek to provide balanced, accurate information that supports public understanding and democratic engagement. For example, during an election, a socially responsible journalist would report on all candidates' positions fairly, ensuring that the public can make informed choices. Social Responsibility Theory also encourages media outlets to serve as watchdogs, holding powerful entities accountable and addressing issues that impact social welfare.

Challenges and Criticisms: Critics argue that the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press can be difficult to uphold in commercial media, where financial pressures may conflict with public interest reporting. Additionally, determining what serves the "public good" is not always straightforward, as different communities may have diverse needs and values.

Ethical Challenges in Modern Media

The modern media landscape, shaped by digital advancements and an evolving social environment, presents a host of ethical challenges that traditional media norms were not fully prepared to address. These challenges require journalists and media organizations to adapt their ethical frameworks to uphold credibility, truthfulness, and responsibility in their reporting. Below is an expanded discussion of each of the ethical issues that are increasingly relevant in today's media environment:

Misinformation and Disinformation: The digital age has intensified misinformation (unintentional inaccuracies) and disinformation (intentional falsehoods). With the rapid speed

of information exchange on social media, false narratives can go viral before factchecking measures can correct them. This creates a significant challenge for journalists who must differentiate between truth and fiction in Realtime.

Implications for Journalists: To combat misinformation, journalists must prioritize rigorous source verification and careful fact-checking. This involves checking multiple reputable sources, cross-referencing information, and ensuring that quotes or images are not omitted from context. Social media, while a valuable newsgathering tool, also requires journalists to be cautious, as unverified content can easily be mistaken for credible information. Additionally, media outlets may face pressure to quickly retract or correct misleading information to maintain credibility.

Clickbait and Sensationalism: In a competitive media environment, the push for viewer engagement can lead to clickbait—headlines crafted to attract clicks and drive traffic, often by exaggerating or misrepresenting the story’s content. Sensationalism is a similar practice where media outlets amplify dramatic elements of a story to create excitement, even if it sacrifices the accuracy or balance of the report.⁶

Implications for Journalists: Clickbait and sensationalism can erode public trust, as audiences may feel misled or manipulated. Ethical journalists should focus on accuracy, even if it means sacrificing higher engagement metrics. In many cases, the ethical dilemma lies in balancing the need for profitability with the responsibility to provide genuine, accurate reporting. Journalists must avoid exaggeration and focus on conveying the facts transparently, allowing the story’s significance to speak for itself.

Real-world Example: The coverage of celebrity scandals often exemplifies sensationalism. While these stories may generate high engagement, they can sometimes blur ethical boundaries, as personal lives and potentially inaccurate or incomplete stories are magnified for public consumption. Ethical journalists would carefully consider the necessity and impact of such coverage on both the individuals involved and the audience.

Privacy and Surveillance: As digital tools make it easier to access personal information, privacy has become a pressing ethical concern. Journalists often encounter situations where private data is readily available through hacking, surveillance, or data leaks. While such information may seem valuable for newsworthy stories, the ethical question revolves around the justification of using private details, especially when individuals’ personal lives are not relevant to the public’s understanding of an issue.

⁶ Zelizer, B. Journalism in the Digital Age (PoliPointPress 2017)

Implications for Journalists: The ethical challenge lies in balancing the public's right to know with respect for personal privacy. For instance, when covering public figures, journalists should distinguish between what is of public interest and what is merely of curiosity or gossip. If a journalist uncovers personal data that reveals potential corruption or poses significant implications for society, it may be deemed ethically permissible to report it. However, in cases where private details are unnecessary to the story, ethical journalists should refrain from publishing them to protect individuals' rights to privacy.

Real-world Example: Consider high-profile cases involving the private lives of public officials. If a journalist discovers details that reveal abuse of power, publishing the information might be justified in the public interest. However, if the details pertain to personal aspects irrelevant to the individual's public role, disclosing them could be seen as an invasion of privacy.

Conflict of Interest: Conflicts of interest arise when journalists have personal, financial, or political connections that could compromise their objectivity. These ties may include financial stakes in companies they report on, personal relationships with sources, or affiliations with political groups. Such conflicts, if unaddressed, can undermine trust in journalism and compromise the perceived impartiality of the news.

Implications for Journalists: To maintain credibility, journalists must avoid situations where personal interests might influence their reporting. This means disclosing any potential conflicts of interest to their editors and the public when relevant. Ethical journalists make a concerted effort to recuse themselves from stories where they may have biases or, alternatively, take steps to ensure that their reporting remains fair and objective.

Real-world Example: If a journalist has family ties to a politician, reporting on that politician could raise questions of bias, even if unintentional. Disclosing this relationship allows audiences to understand potential biases, maintaining transparency and integrity.

Social media and Citizen Journalism: With the rise of social media, citizen journalism has become a powerful force, allowing ordinary individuals to report news as it happens. However, the lack of formal training in journalistic ethics can sometimes blur the lines between credible news and personal opinions. Social media platforms also facilitate rapid information spread, making it difficult to distinguish between fact-based reporting and opinionated or inaccurate posts.

Implications for Journalists: Journalists are tasked with maintaining professional standards on social media platforms while engaging in a space where information can be easily distorted. Verifying content from citizen journalists or other social media sources becomes crucial,

especially when eyewitness reports or amateur videos emerge during breaking news events. Furthermore, journalists must be cautious about blending personal opinions with their professional identity, as this can compromise perceptions of objectivity.⁷

Real-world Example: During live, developing events, such as protests or natural disasters, citizen journalists often provide Realtime updates. Ethical journalists can benefit from these firsthand accounts, but must independently verify them to ensure accuracy before including them in official reporting. Additionally, they should avoid using unverifiable or unreliable social media content, as this could mislead audiences.

The Role of Media Ethics in Democratic Society

Expanding on the role of media ethics in a democratic society over four pages will provide an in-depth understanding of how ethical journalism is crucial to supporting democratic values. Here is a structured outline with a detailed discussion of each element.

Introduction to Media Ethics in a Democratic Society: Media ethics play a fundamental role in upholding the principles of democracy by ensuring that journalism serves as a trustworthy and constructive force in society. Ethical journalism is essential for promoting informed citizenship, holding power to account, and fostering transparency. In democratic societies, where citizens' voices and votes are the foundation of governance, the media acts as both an information source and a watchdog. This role, however, is effective only when journalists adhere to high ethical standards that prioritize truth, fairness, and integrity.⁸

- 1. Fostering an Informed Citizenry:** An informed citizenry is the backbone of democracy, enabling individuals to make educated decisions and engage in public discourse. Media ethics support this by ensuring that journalists provide accurate, unbiased, and comprehensive information. Ethical journalism that values truthfulness, fairness, and accountability allows citizens to receive a complete picture of events, policies, and political decisions.

Truthfulness and Accuracy: Journalists who prioritize truthfulness and accuracy help citizens understand complex issues, such as economic policies, healthcare debates, and international relations, without misrepresentation. Misinformation, on the other hand, can mislead the public and undermine democratic processes by creating confusion or

⁷ Tufekci (2015) Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press 2015).

⁸ Reporters Without Borders, *2023 World Press Freedom Index: Analysis of Media Ethics and Safety Concerns* (2023)

misguiding decisions. For instance, ethical journalists covering elections avoid sensationalist reporting or unchecked claims that might unfairly influence voter behaviour.

Balanced Representation of Perspectives: A democratic society benefits from diverse opinions and perspectives, as they encourage critical thinking and tolerance. Ethical journalism upholds this by presenting various viewpoints, allowing citizens to explore issues from multiple angles. Balanced reporting fosters an environment where audiences can form independent opinions rather than be swayed by biased or one-sided information. This practice strengthens democratic values by promoting a more inclusive, tolerant, and well-informed society.

Example in Practice: Coverage of issues such as climate change, where multiple scientific, economic, and social perspectives are involved, is a prime example. Ethical journalists ensure that the complexity of the issue is communicated to the public, providing context from various sources, including scientists, policymakers, and affected communities. This allows citizens to grasp the full impact of the issue and participate meaningfully in democratic discussions and decisions related to climate policy.

- 2. Enabling Accountability and Transparency:** One of the media's most critical roles in a democracy is to hold those in power accountable. Ethical journalism achieves this by investigating and reporting on government actions, corporate practices, and other power structures, thereby promoting transparency. By adhering to ethical standards, journalists act as guardians of democracy, exposing wrongdoing and corruption, advocating for social justice, and demanding accountability from powerful entities.

Investigative Journalism and Whistleblowing: Ethical journalism encourages investigative reporting that goes beyond surface level coverage to uncover hidden truths, especially in cases of corruption or abuse of power. By verifying sources, factchecking thoroughly, and respecting whistleblowers' rights, journalists can responsibly bring attention to serious issues that impact public welfare. This form of journalism plays a watchdog role, deterring unethical behaviour within governments and corporations by bringing it to public awareness.

Transparency and the Public Interest: Transparency in reporting—such as explaining sources, methods, and the journalist's motivations—builds trust between media and the public. Journalists who clarify how information was obtained or provide context for complex issues contribute to a better-informed public and empower citizens

to question authority. Ethical journalism in this sense is instrumental in fostering a more transparent and accountable society, where leaders are less likely to engage in corruption or misuse of power without fear of exposure.

Example in Practice: During the Watergate scandal, journalists upheld media ethics by rigorously verifying information from confidential sources, ultimately exposing corruption within the U.S. government. This accountability journalism, grounded in ethics, demonstrates the media's potential to protect democratic institutions by holding powerful figures accountable for unethical behaviour.

- 3. Supporting Transparency in Governance:** Transparent governance is a hallmark of democracy, as it allows citizens to understand and evaluate government policies and actions. Media ethics bolster this transparency by ensuring journalists provide clear, accurate information on governmental activities without distortion or bias. An ethical press serves as a bridge between the government and the public, translating complex legal and political matters into accessible content.

Ethical Reporting on Policy and Legislation: Ethical journalism ensures that news about policy changes, legislative updates, and public programs is accurate and free from political or corporate manipulation. By reporting on these issues in a balanced and factual manner, journalists contribute to public understanding and encourage informed engagement with governmental processes. Citizens rely on media to break down complex legislative changes, allowing them to evaluate how such changes impact their lives and, ultimately, to advocate for or against them.

Role of Objectivity in Reporting on Governance: Objectivity in journalism helps prevent media from being used as a tool for propaganda or misinformation, especially in politically charged environments. Ethical journalists prioritize the public interest over any personal or political bias, helping to uphold democracy by providing citizens with impartial and well-rounded information. Objectivity is particularly essential in media coverage of elections, international relations, and other issues directly affecting democratic choices.

Example in Practice: Consider coverage of a new healthcare policy that could affect millions. Ethical journalists will avoid framing the policy solely from one political perspective and instead present balanced insights from experts, policymakers, and the public. This approach allows citizens to understand the policy's merits and shortcomings, empowering them to engage in meaningful democratic debates.

4. Promoting Social Justice and Empowering Marginalized Voices: In a democratic society, the media has a responsibility to represent all citizens, including marginalized communities often overlooked by mainstream narratives. Ethical journalism champions social justice by amplifying the voices of the underserved, highlighting systemic inequalities, and advocating for human rights. By giving a platform to diverse perspectives, ethical journalists promote inclusivity and democratic values.

Addressing Underrepresented Issues and Communities: Ethical journalism involves reporting on issues that affect marginalized or minority groups, such as poverty, discrimination, and social inequality. By spotlighting these issues, journalists contribute to public awareness and foster social empathy. This representation strengthens democracy by ensuring all citizens are included in the national conversation, reducing societal divisions, and promoting equality.

Humanizing Stories of Injustice: Ethical journalists often take on the role of storytellers for those who may otherwise lack a voice. Reporting on human rights abuses, systemic racism, and other social justice issues requires sensitivity, respect, and accuracy to avoid further harm. Ethical journalism in this area empowers communities to push for change and hold institutions accountable for injustices that undermine democratic values.

Example in Practice: During the COVID19 pandemic, journalists highlighted disparities in healthcare access and economic impacts on low-income communities. Ethical reporting on these inequalities spurred public discussion on social policies and prompted government action to address these disparities. This example underscores how journalism focused on social justice can help bridge gaps in democratic representation and promote a fairer society.

Securities and Exchange Board of India & Anr. v. Sahara India Real Estate Corp. Ltd. & Ors. The Supreme Court of India discussed media trials and the effect of widespread media coverage on the administration of justice in this case.⁹ The Court noted that although the media is essential to public education, it must use caution and uphold everyone's right to a fair trial. In order to avoid biased reporting that can impede court proceedings, the ruling underlined the importance of responsible journalism, especially in delicate legal issues. This case demonstrated the need to strike a balance between journalistic freedom and the moral duty to protect the rights of those who are

⁹ (2012) 10 SCC 603

involved in legal procedures.

State of Tamil Nadu v. R. Rajagopal (Auto Shankar Case)

The Supreme Court of India addressed the freedom of the press versus the right to privacy in this historic decision. When a prisoner, "Auto Shankar," wanted to publish his autobiography exposing suspected corruption among government officials, the situation developed.¹⁰ The Court decided that freedom of expression permits journalists to publish topics of public interest, despite the state's efforts to stop it. It also underlined that this freedom must be used sensibly, protecting people's privacy and steering clear of sensationalism. This ruling made clear how crucial it is to uphold ethical norms when reporting, particularly when discussing private issues that can be of public interest.

Conclusion

Media ethics play an indispensable role in shaping journalism's contribution to democracy by fostering trust, integrity, and accountability. In a world increasingly influenced by digital advancements and globalized information flows, media outlets and journalists are confronted with a multitude of ethical challenges, from battling misinformation to navigating privacy issues. Adhering to ethical standards empowers journalists to uphold the principles that democratic societies rely on—truth, transparency, and fairness. Ethical journalism is essential to building an informed public. By prioritizing truthfulness and accuracy, the media provides citizens with reliable information, allowing them to make decisions based on facts rather than conjecture or sensationalism. Ethical principles such as impartiality and independence further reinforce this trust, as audiences recognize that journalists committed to these values are working free from political or corporate influence. This independence is vital to ensuring that the media can act as an effective watchdog, monitoring power structures and giving voice to those without influence. By calling attention to corruption, injustice, and social issues, ethical journalism promotes transparency and holds individuals and institutions accountable to the public.

¹⁰ (1994) 6 SCC 632