

FROM REEL TO REALITY: EXPLORING THE NOTION OF OBJECTIVITY AND MEDIA ETHICS THROUGH THE FILM 'NEW DELHI TIMES'

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Seek truth and report it. Minimize harm. Act independently. Be accountable.
Society of Professional Journalists, 2011

Abstract: *An award winning and critically acclaimed movie, New Delhi Times is among a very few films which grapples with the dark and dubious relationship of politics, media, and corruption. The film debates on the traditional construction of objectivity in news reporting. It sets our sight on the journalistic ethics by reviving the debate whether if a journalist is covering a riot, should he or she help a wounded victim on the road or rejoice at a perfect photograph or a story he or she has chanced upon? In the contemporary media scenario, journalists are often accused of compromising the ethical standards while reporting a disaster or a tragedy. Taking the film as a case study, this paper ponders on the desensitization of media professionals towards tragedies and questions the role of a journalist as a detached observer or someone who bears the obligation of unravelling truth behind the incident.*

Keywords: *journalism, politics, corruption, objectivity, ethical reporting*

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Introduction

The realm of journalism has seldom been explored in Hindi cinema. However, the 1986 film *New Delhi Times* stands out as an exception, being remarkably ahead of its time in its realistic depiction of the intricate connections between politics, criminal activities, and the media. Exploring a relatively uncharted path, the film has taken up the responsibility of exposing the rot within and that is precisely the reason why *New Delhi Times* is relevant even today. Directed by Ramesh Sharma, the film revolves around Shashi Kapoor as Vikas Pande, an upright executive editor of a daily newspaper *The New Delhi Times*, which is run by an honest businessman Jagannath Poddar, a role aptly played by Manohar Singh. When Vikas Pande decides to investigate the murder of a MLA, which seems linked to a bigger political conspiracy, the incorruptible journalist is dragged into a quagmire of lies, deception, political manipulations, and murder. All evidence leads to the dynamic political leader Ajay Singh, played onscreen by Late Om Puri, but politics is rarely ever so simple, a fact that Pande learns the hard way as he goes on unravelling the mysterious murder case.

New Delhi Times emerged as a sharp and gripping political thriller with well-crafted characters and an exceptional storyline that delved into complex themes like journalistic impartiality and media misconduct. Only a handful of films have come close to presenting a genuine portrayal when tackling matters of the press. The film draws inspiration from the real-life case of *The Indian Express*, where editor Arun Shourie uncovered the criminal associations of Maharashtra chief minister, A.R. Antulay. The character of Jagannath Poddar in the film is believed to be a portrayal of *The Indian Express* owner, R.N. Goenka.

New Delhi Times refuses to compromise its integrity in any way. It confronts the murky and questionable nexus between politics, media, and corruption, and tackles significant concerns regarding ethics, impartiality, and editorial integrity. These concerns remain pertinent even in today's journalistic landscape, and the film adeptly addresses them with a convincing approach, supported by substantial evidence of thorough research.

Objectivity revisited

Stressing the paramount importance of objectivity in news reporting, Mindich (1998, p. 1) wrote that "If American journalism were a religion, as it has been called from time to time, its supreme deity would be objectivity". Conventionally, journalism as a profession has emerged alongside the notion of objectivity. According to Schudson (1978, p. 5),

Objectivity is a standard that requires journalists to try to put aside emotions and prejudices, including those implanted by the spinners and manipulators who meet them at every turn, as they gather and present the

facts. They recognize objectivity as an ideal, the pursuit of which never ends and never totally succeeds.

This resulted in new set of rules for the newsroom to ensure journalists stick to facts and leading to first ethical code for journalism. Maras (2013, p. 18) stated that, objectivity ‘in general’ is a powerful cultural idea, one that has its roots in the foundations of Western science and the enlightenment.

Also, as Hackett (1984, p. 232) puts it, the ideal of objectivity suggests that “facts can be separated from opinion or value judgments, and that journalists can stand apart from the real-world events whose truth or meaning they transfer to the news audience by means of neutral language and competent reporting techniques”. Therefore, the notion that journalists should maintain a detached and unbiased stance while presenting information, abstaining from incorporating their personal values and viewpoints into their reporting responsibilities, is inevitably inherent to discussions about objectivity.

The film puts a thinking cap on us and asks whether the role of a journalist is to be a passive spectator, like the photojournalist Anwar, played by M. K. Raina, or be someone whose duty is to inform public about the truth behind the incident.

When they reach the hotel room, Anwar says-

“Yahan aaya to pata chala dange ho rahe hain, mazaa aa gaya...”

Bas camera leke toot pada.”

¹ET - On reaching here, I found out that riots are happening. I was thrilled. I just jumped at it.

Pande asks-

“Tumhe riots me mazaa aata hai?”¹

¹ET- You are thrilled by riots?

Anwar says,

“Ama yaar tum samajh gaye na main na kya keh raha hun. Tumhe ek achchi story mil gayi, mujhe kuch achche photographs. Bas.”

¹ET- You understood exactly what I was saying. You found a good story. I took some good photographs. What else.



Visual Reference 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsbxWDcrlqM>

* ¹ET is English Translation.

The progressive development of the principle of objectivity in journalism has entailed a transition from emphasizing neutrality to highlighting accuracy, balance, and fairness. Numerous journalists started confessing that they no longer adhered to the concept of objectivity, rather valuing truthfulness, and ethical rectitude, thereby simplifying the issue of knowledge into a question of ethical principles, often interpreted in a relativistic manner.



Visual Reference 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm8-tf4Dfgo>

Critics also point out that journalists engage in more than just conveying facts; they also choose the facts they present, their sources, and their perspective on a narrative. Objectivity was seen as unfavourable since it fosters reporting practices that come with inherent biases, like heavy dependence on official sources. Furthermore, striving for objectivity is believed to foster uninteresting reporting that falls short of delving deeper into the truth. In the contemporary media world, as stated by Overholser (2006), “most major codes of ethics no longer use the word objectivity and with the turn of the century, the Society of Professional Journalists, the oldest organization representing journalists in the United States, removed the term from its code and added instead accountability.”

Media Ethics and Editorial Independence

One of the longstanding ethical principles in journalism, pertains to editorial autonomy, stress that editors must remain uninfluenced by advertisers and commercial influences. *New Delhi Times* has unequivocally highlighted the issue of editorial independence. In one of the scenes of the film, the owner of the newspaper is seen refraining from interfering in the selection of news stories and headlines by saying,

“Ye kaam editor ka hai, usi ko karne do”.

¹*ET- This is the job of an editor, let him do it.*



Visual Reference 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmjt3dKS0JE>

The devaluation of the office of editor is a serious issue hampering the news selection process in Indian media houses. While addressing on the National Press Day in 2009, Justice G.N. Ray, former chairman of Press Council of India, said that:

the editors have been increasingly marginalised, and they have little or no say about the content of the newspaper. In practice, it is the person heading the department of marketing and advertisement, who decides what space to be left for contents to be published other than advertisements or write ups desired by the advertisers and corporate sector.

The impact of marketing on journalism to gain maximum profit with high circulation figures has shrunk the role and opinion of an editor. These marketing managers are generally graduates from international universities and amidst the growing media culture of commercialization and corporatization, they tend to utilize their international exposure of treating a newspaper as a brand and to earn maximum profits even if credibility must be sacrificed for it. That's how journalism in India which had played the role of serving the nation has transformed into a full-fledged corporate business to achieve financial benefits. This decline in standards of journalism by ignoring the role of editors is a serious challenge in present print media industry. Big business houses that invest large amounts of money in newspaper industry lack confidence in an editor who can harvest them high profits and instead look upon for a marketing manager for returns. This has affected the individuality of an editor who feels suffocated in their marketing scenario and is unable to carry forwards his or her viewpoints strongly amidst corporate interests of owners. As a result, the impact is felt on the content priorities, leading to a disregard for genuine concerns of the populace and marginalized groups. The role of an editor has been condensed in the newspapers because of new generation of marketing managers and publishers entering the arena of journalism.

The autonomy of editors is currently facing a more significant risk than ever witnessed in the past within the realms of newspapers and broadcasting. This includes legal regulations and other factors. Moreover, the pressure of vying commercial concerns to expand their readerships or audiences for sustainability adds to the threat. Concurrently, advertising auctions among media entities and proliferation of numerous internet and alternative platforms compounds the situation by “appropriating” stories from well-funded traditional newsrooms, which possess substantial editorial budgets, and providing them to recipients without any cost.

In this new landscape, there is an additional obstacle facing those responsible for safeguarding editorial concerns, as an editor has little time to perform as an editor. He/she is now perceived more as the leader of the production process, responsible for generating content across various platforms. This includes being deeply involved in overall management, human resources, circulation, marketing, and devising strategies for generating revenue through the website. The role of an editor had been reduced to the task of a marketing agent, who is responsible for producing a product that sells. Several editors of prominent

newspapers who refused to stoop in front of political pressures had been shown the door by the management. Editors nowadays have become disposable commodities if they fail to meet the private interests of the management of their newspapers. It would be poignant to mention that *New Delhi Times* has hinted the initiation of this process when the son of the newspaper owner takes charge of the office in the absence of his father.



Visual Reference 4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49QOaR9KKvQ>

A real challenge to pursue media ethics at ground level has been reflected in the film through the Plight of the local newspapers. The conversation between an editor of a Delhi based newspaper (Shashi Kapoor) and the editor of the local newspaper in Gazipur paints the grim economic and social conditions in which local newspapers run their daily business. The editor of the local newspaper narrates how impossible it is to create a meaningful experience in the shape of a probing news story out of a good leads and content. They are at the mercy of the local administration and face a constant threat of closure if they strengthened the courage to publish any story which might displease the local high and mighty.



Visual Reference 5

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOIJLsCvKpw>

Investigative journalism and its impact on journalists

The film reflected on one of the least studied issues of the impact and toll of investigative journalism on the life and family of a journalist. The stress, anxiety and vulnerability of a journalist investigating a story which might unravel political corruption has been vividly depicted in the film as Vikas Pandey, the Executive Editor of *New Delhi Times*, played by Shashi Kapoor, feels that he is entrapped by media-politician nexus.

Greene (1983), as quoted in Janisch (1998, p. 16), has defined investigative journalism as follows:

It is the reporting through one's own work product and initiative; matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret. The three basic elements are that the investigation be the work of the reporter, not a report of an investigation made by someone else; that the subject of the story involves something of reasonable importance to the reader or viewer; and that others are attempting to hide these matters from the public.

Janisch (1998, p. 20) describes more precisely investigative journalism by saying: “The heart of investigative journalism is the scandal. The purpose of investigative journalism is to unravel a scandal. If it achieves to do so, it is effective.” Janisch (1998, p. 20) mentions two stages that need to be passed through for an issue to become a scandal. “First, investigative journalism needs to expose the issue; it needs to unearth something of public interest. Secondly, it needs to be able to create public resentment; the public needs to be outraged about the issue.” This can only occur when there is a breach of moral or legal norms that individuals wish to rectify and address. This entire process results in the news which is not only a piece of investigative journalism but also verified through research.

Investigative journalism is also considered as a form of resistance that can be learned by a journalist. Pöttker (2003, p. 14) quoting Ludwig, elaborated it as a “fine art or the supreme level of journalism”. Investigative journalism employs a distinct language that enables resistance through communication. It’s explicit in divulging information that is typically suppressed, while also maintaining subtlety, implanting unnoticeably fresh concepts into readers’ thoughts. By being explicit, attention is drawn, provoking strong reactions. The combination of these elements works to shape new realities, aligning with the core intention of investigative journalism and its approach to resistance. *New Delhi Times* depicts this form of resistance quite vividly when the management of the newspaper, under the temporary leadership of the owner’s son Mr. Jugal Kishore, played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda, asks the editor Vikas Pande to mellow down the article he has written unveiling the murder mystery of Gazipur MLA, the journalist not only refuses to oblige but tersely says that:

“This article is so provocative. Bina changes hum isse nhi chhaap skte.”

¹*ET - This article is so provocative. We cannot publish it without changes.*

“Agar ye article chapega to ase he chapega Mr Jugal Kishore. Main is article me coma ya full stop bhi badalne ke liye taiyar nahi hoon.”

¹*ET - If at all it is published, it will be as it is, Mr Jugal Kishore. I am not going to change even a coma or a full stop in this news story.*



Visual Reference 6

https://youtu.be/_t6AEsYnF40s

Place of emotions in reporting

The movie also underpins the role of emotions within journalism. Scholars and professionals in the media field have advocated the necessity for a skilful fusion of emotional and impartial journalism. The notion that journalism should maintain

a distant and unbiased stance amidst chaos is no longer relevant. Reports on infamous incidents like the Delhi rape case, Jessica Lal's murder, Priyadarshini Mattoo's assault and murder, among others, weren't the outcome of detached journalism. These stories would not have come to light if the journalists covering them had opted for a neutral and disengaged approach. Emotions serve as a driving force for journalists and contribute to public engagement. The conflict of emotions and detached reporting came alive in the film during a conversation between Vikas Pande, his wife Nisha and an ex-bureaucrat Mr. D'Mello. On Vikas's persistence of Ajay Singh's involvement in murder and hooch tragedy, his wife responds:

Nisha- "Vikas, tum ek baat lekar aise peeche pad jaate ho - Pata nahi kis hadd tak jaoge?"

¹ET- Vikas, you just get obsessed with an issue, don't know how far you will go?

Vikas- "Sirf sach ke hadd tak."

¹ET- Only onto the truth.



Visual Reference 7

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8-ZxYrvsfI>

Media scholars contend that individuals are more responsive to emotions rather than mere ideas or facts. Emotions act as a driving force, propelling people to engage more with news stories. They also motivate journalists to move upwards in an industry that often lacks consistent rewards for honest and commendable work. In the current media landscape, emotion is gaining prominence as a significant factor in both the production and consumption of news. The accentuation of emotional significance not only redefines the traditional concept of journalistic impartiality, but is also fundamentally reshaping the very notion of news. Grasping the way individuals connect with news on both personal and communal level is crucial for those seeking to establish a connection through their journalism. While practical or professional motivations might render news relevant, the emotional response also assumes a pivotal role in reacting to or assimilating news content.

However, journalism based on emotions has a real danger of slipping to self-promotion or self-congratulation. The news coverage of Haiti's disastrous earthquake in 2010 by CNN is the classic example of the same. Dr Sanjay Gupta, the principal medical correspondent for CNN, guides a film crew to a hospital, revealing the dire circumstances faced by the victims due to shortages of beds, medical professionals, and medications. Notably, CNN also ensured frequent display of an additional scene, featuring the correspondent dashing

through the streets to pick up a child, holding and checking the child for any injuries. Now can this coverage be termed as an expression of compassion or a perfectly choreographed scene of self-promotion?

It is imperative for a journalist to not let the emotion override and overshadow critical inquiry and analysis required for the news story. A suitable approach to balance emotion with professionalism is by means of transparency. By being transparent, a journalist can avoid subjectivity and biases which may seep in the news story laden with emotions. While being objective and detached might be effective in political coverage, these qualities are inadequate when it comes to narrating tales of profound human distress. Arguably, the best journalism in the face of tragedy emerged from reporters who permitted themselves to experience emotion both internally and externally of their news story.

Violence against journalists

Increasing impunity for violence against journalists has been perfectly captured in the film. Growing attack on media people and organizations by state and non-state actors has been plaguing the Indian media and is a matter of grave concern. The film reminds us of the contemporary India where information is danger. When Shashi Kapoor narrates the attack on him, the managing editor of the newspaper Mr. Shah says,

“Vikas, tum per koi politician attack nahi karega”

¹ET- “Vikas, no politician will touch a journalist like you”

and Shashi Kapoor replies,

“vo jamane gaye Shah sahib, ab to kuch bhi ho sakta hai”

¹ET - “Gone are those days Shah Sahab, nowadays, anything can happen... to anybody”



Visual Reference 8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0v73ppvMeI>

The exhaustive list maintained by the American non-profit and non-government organization, the Committee for Protection of Journalists reflects that 75 media professionals have been killed in India since 1992 and among them 44 were killed with definite motives. Journalist Jagendra Singh, Rajdev Ranjan and Gauri Lankesh were among them. Their stories are an example of how a journalist writing about politics, crime and corruption in India is confronted with fatal consequences. As per the annual ranking of ‘World Press Freedom Index’ released by Reporters Without Borders (RWB),

India ranked 161st out of 180 countries and journalism organizations have already expressed alarm over an increased level of hostility towards the media encouraged by politicians, as well as efforts by authoritarian regimes to export their alternative vision of journalism.

The report also mentioned, “a total of 67 journalists were killed in the year 2022, 534 are currently in prison, and 65 are being held hostage”.

The non-profit organization based in Paris conducts a yearly global assessment of fatal aggression and mistreatment faced by journalists, and their data reveals an unparalleled surge in antagonism directed towards media professionals. The prominently covered assassinations of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Slovak data journalist Jan Kuciak underscored the extreme measures to which adversaries of media freedom are willing to resort. Majority of the journalists who lost their lives were intentionally singled out. Employing violent tactics to stifle the media serves as an alarming indicator of a deteriorating democratic framework. Impunity doesn't solely arises due to ineffectual law enforcement and criminal justice systems; it also reflects a society that readily embraces and sustains violence without questioning it.

Desensitization of journalists towards tragedies

In addition to exploring the interconnection between politics and the media, *New Delhi Times* also deliberates on a pertinent issue of media neutrality and the feasibility of journalists distancing themselves from the tragedies they report on. The film contemplates a significant concern of journalists being desensitized towards distressing events, a matter they regularly confront. Often, journalists arrive at the scene shortly after a traumatic occurrence, becoming the initial receptacles of the fragmented memories of those affected by the trauma. According to Van der Merwe (2005), “their ability to maintain objectivity might erode, and enduring changes could emerge in their cognitive frameworks, beliefs, and perceptions about themselves and others”.

In a poignant sequence, Pande gently reproaches a photographer for finding enjoyment in capturing scenes of a riot. The photographer candidly admits that such situations used to deeply affect him when they occurred infrequently, but the continuous coverage of riots and law enforcement issues has desensitized him over time. McMahan (2001, p. 55) has also concluded after intensive study that “journalists reporting trauma stories get desensitized over a period of time”.

According to Castle (2002), “personal exposure to traumatic news stories and images can be an issue for reporters, photographers or broadcast news crews working in the field. Empirical evidence shows that exposure to trauma has a negative impact on journalists”. Figley (1999, pp. 3-28) notes that “one can

be affected by traumatic stress without physically being harmed or threatened. Hearing about an event or witnessing its aftermath has the potential to cause significant post-traumatic stress”.

Balancing the concept of Gender equity

One of the rare Hindi films on gender relations, *New Delhi Times* perfectly showcased the beautifully balanced relationship between working couples and the professional and intellectual acumen of Shashi Kapoor is deftly supported by Sharmila Tagore who is presented as an equal partner. Throughout the film, you will not find any instances where her intelligence, her profession and her advice have been undermined by the husband and even the filmmaker seems to be aware of the same. Through the conversations between husband and wife, the viewer is unable to decide who has a voice in these discourses and who is silenced.

Conclusion

Journalism plays a pivotal role in upholding the proper functioning of democracy and serves as a vital platform for exposing corruption at the highest echelons of power. However, it's not immune to corruption itself. The primary duty of journalists is to keep the public well-informed. *New Delhi Times* serves as a reminder of the timeless definition of news: information that someone, somewhere does not want you to know. This definition remains relevant in the contemporary era. Governments, political entities, and various institutions strive to manipulate the media to shape public perceptions. It is essential for the media to resist manipulation while ensuring that it does not become a battleground for competing groups of spin doctors and vested interests. The concluding dialogue of the film portrays the nexus of crime and politics and the resolve of a journalist to continue exposing the same. Arguably the most significant lesson from the movie is that, despite the prevailing pessimism, the catastrophic decline of journalism has not transpired. Journalists continue to persist in their vocation, even though the financial uncertainty within the field heightens their apprehension, particularly regarding investigative reports that may provoke hostility.



Visual Reference 9

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YblKUs6uuuA>

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