

5 Mahatma Gandhi, Media Ethics, and United Nations

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Not by coincidence the 1991 UNESCO Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press was produced in Windhoek, Namibia, by building a framework concerning media development, characterizing it by freedom, pluralism, and independence.

Without any obstacle to freedom of expression in accordance with the fundamental purpose of UNESCO to promote the “free flow of ideas by word and image,” a new communication strategy should strengthen the fragile press freedom in the face of authoritarianism and political violence.

An eminent but widely ignored precursor of these UNESCO principles was young lawyer Mohandas K. Gandhi who financed his *Indian Opinion* in South Africa, simultaneously authoring numerous articles and editorials. It is the history of the International Printing Press which nowadays becomes relevant to reflect on media ethics today in a unifying world federation. This chapter shall highlight the significance of the free and independent press as a collaborative joint project of a pressure group of political and social reformers – in the times of widespread fake news and hate speech!

Truth-telling is crucial in media ethics as any opposition of truth-telling is considered deception as novel readers can study in dystopian accounts like George Orwell’s “1984,” which demonstrates the mechanisms of twisting the truth as systematic propaganda tools. Ironically, it is George Orwell who ignored the journalist and editor Gandhi when he – in his 1949 “Reflections on Gandhi” essay – accused Gandhi to “not understand the nature of totalitarianism” and that he “saw everything in terms of his own struggle against the British government. The important point here is not so much that the British treated him forbearingly as that he was always able to command publicity.” But *Indian Opinion* was – by far – not an easy task to create publicity. And this history-transforming project proved the educative aspects of media ethics, essential for our twenty-first century.

Press Freedom and Media Ethics

The Windhoek Declaration for the Development of a Free, Independent and Pluralistic Press, short: Windhoek Declaration is a statement of press freedom principles by African newspaper journalists in 1991. The Declaration was

produced at a UNESCO seminar, “Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press,” held in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, from April 29 to May 3, 1991.

The date of the Declaration's adoption, May 3, has subsequently been declared as World Press Freedom Day. The document has been viewed as widely influential, as the first in a series of such declarations around the world, and as a crucial affirmation of the international community's commitment to freedom of the press.¹

May 3 acts as a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom and is also a day of reflection among media professionals about issues of press freedom and professional ethics. Just as importantly, World Press Freedom Day is a day of support for media which are targets for the restraint, or abolition, of press freedom. It is also a day of remembrance for those journalists who lost their lives in the pursuit of a story.

Every year, May 3 is a date which celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom, to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. World Press Freedom Day was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1993 following a Recommendation adopted at the 26th session of UNESCO's General Conference in 1991. This in turn was a response to a call by African journalists who in 1991 produced the landmark Windhoek Declaration sur le pluralisme on media pluralism and independence.

Rallying to the Windhoek principles, subsequent workshops aimed at reproducing the momentum brought by Windhoek ideals of media freedom independence and pluralism to other regions. Four regional seminars were organized for Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab States, and Central and Eastern Europe. The events resulted in four declarations:

- 1992 – Alma Ata Declaration Seminar on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Asian Media, held in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, from October 5–9, 1992
- 1994 – Santiago Declaration Seminar on Media Development and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, Santiago, Chile, 1994
- 1996 – Sana'a Declaration Seminar on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Arab Media, Sana'a, Yemen, 1996
- 1997 – Sofia Declaration Seminar on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media with special focus on Central and Eastern Europe, Sofia, Bulgaria, 1997

We can find these subsequent documents: The Declaration of Alma Ata on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Asian Media (1993)², Sana'a Declaration for the Middle East (1996, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 29th Session in 1997),³ and the Declaration of Santiago

on Media Development and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean (1994, endorsed by the General Conference of UNESCO at its 28th session in 1995),⁴ Sofia Declaration on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Media with special focus on Central and Eastern Europe (1997).⁵

UNESCO's General Conference endorsed the Windhoek Declaration in 1991 and following the proposal of Windhoek seminar participants to devote a day to the promotion of press freedom. In 1993 the UN declared May 3 as World Press Freedom Day, the same day of the adoption of the Windhoek Declaration. Since then, the UNESCO has organized international conferences to debate and raise awareness about press freedom's most pressing issues. The conferences have increased in scope and size across the years, and the spirit of adopting a declaration at the end of each conference has been maintained most of the time.

- 1993 – World Press Freedom Day established by UN General Assembly
- 1994/1996 – World Press Freedom Day celebration at UNESCO headquarters
- 1997 – Bilbao, Spain. Conference on tolerance and the media
- 1998 – London, United Kingdom
- 1999 – Bogota, Colombia. Conference on unpunished crimes against journalists
- 2000 – Geneva, Switzerland. Round Table on media in conflict and post-conflict areas
- 2001 – Namibia, Windhoek. The Windhoek Seminar: “Ten years on: Assessment, Challenges and Prospects” African Charter on Broadcasting⁶ adopted by participants of the seminar
- 2002 – Manila, Philippines. “Terrorism and Media” Resolution adopted by participants of the conference on Terrorism and Media⁷
- 2003 – Kingston, Jamaica. “Freedom of Expression: Early New Millennium Challenges”
- 2004 – Belgrade Declaration⁸ on “Support to Media in Violent Conflict and Countries in Transition”
- 2005 – Dakar Declaration⁹ on “Media and Good Governance”
- 2006 – Colombo Declaration on “Media, Development and Poverty Eradication”
- 2007 – Medellin Declaration¹⁰ on “Securing the Safety of Journalists and Combating Impunity”
- 2008 – Maputo Declaration¹¹ on “Freedom of Expression, Access to Information and Empowerment of People”
- 2009 – Doha Declaration¹² on “The potential of media: dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation”
- 2010 – Brisbane Declaration¹³ on “Freedom of Information: the Right to Know”
- 2011 – Washington Declaration¹⁴ on “21st century media: new frontiers, new barriers”

- 2012 – Carthage Declaration¹⁵ on “New Voices: Media Freedom Helping to Transform Societies”
- 2013 – San Jose Declaration¹⁶ on “Safe to Speak: Securing Freedom of Expression in all Media”
- 2014 – Paris Declaration¹⁷ on “Media Freedom for a Better Future: Shaping the Post-2015 Development Agenda”
- 2015 - Riga Declaration¹⁸ on “Let Journalism Thrive! Towards Better Reporting, Gender Equality, and Media Safety in the Digital Age”
- 2016 – Finlandia Declaration¹⁹ on “Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms – This Is Your Right”
- 2017- Jakarta Declaration²⁰ on “Critical Minds for Critical Times: Media’s role in advancing peaceful, just and Inclusive Societies”
- 2018 – Accra Declaration²¹ on “Keeping Power in Check: Media, Justice and the Rule of Law”
- 2019 - Addis Ababa Declaration²² on “Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation”
- 2020 - The Hague Commitment to increase the Safety of Journalists²³: “Journalism Without Fear or Favour”
- 2021 – Windhoek+30 Declaration²⁴: “Information as a Public Good”

Most recently we read the “Joint statement on the Safety of Journalists on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day 2022,”²⁵ delivered by the Presidents of the United Nations General Assembly, the UNESCO General Conference, and the Human Rights Council at Punta del Este, Uruguay, explicitly referring to “the 2021 UN General Assembly resolution on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity (A/RES/76/173), the 2020 Human Rights Council resolution on the safety of journalists (A/HRC/RES/45/18), and the 2021 Windhoek+30 Declaration on information as a public good (UNESCO General Conference Resolution 41C.41).”

In essence, all these declarations linked with UNESCO “applaud those governments which have made the safety of journalists a priority, within their borders and beyond, and highlight the significant contribution of civil society organizations that are committed to advancing media freedom and safety” in a time when “challenges prevail, including high levels of impunity for crimes against journalists, a rise in the number of journalists detained and an increased legal harassment against them, online violence, the use of surveillance tools to hinder the journalist’s work, increased attacks on women journalists, and the rise of killings in non-conflict environments” with the perspective to “build a safer and more enabling environment for journalists and media workers, and protect the right of every citizen to reliable, and, often, lifesaving information.”

It should not be necessary to repeat the efforts to summarize in a survey “Mass media codes of ethics and councils: a comparative international study on professional standards”²⁶ (1980), but most recent requests for “new ethical guidelines and self-regulation for the media”²⁷ cannot be

ignored and, along similar lines, 30 journalists from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka gathered virtually in September 2021 to produce the “Code of Conduct to Improve Conflict Sensitive Reporting and Safety of Journalists in South Asia.” The reviewed and revised document was launched by UNESCO and the Public Media Alliance (PMA) in November 2021.²⁸

Conflict-sensitive reporting contributes to reconciliation and peace-building, which is at the heart of UNESCO’s mandate. The Code of Conduct aims to make reporting on conflict more comprehensive, insightful, and trustworthy. It covers minimizing risks to communal harmony through impartial journalism, human rights, and gendered approaches to reporting, and ensuring reliability and confidentiality of sources, among other areas.

“International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism” were prepared under the auspices of UNESCO by meetings of international and regional organizations of journalists already between 1978 and 1983, issued by the Fourth Consultative Meeting, representing 400,000 working journalists in all parts of the world, in Paris, on November 20, 1983:²⁹

”Principle I : Peoples’ right to true information

People and individuals have the right to acquire an objective picture of reality by means of accurate and comprehensive information as well as to express themselves freely through the various media of culture and communication.

Principle II : The journalist’s dedication to objective reality

The foremost task of the journalist is to serve the people’s right to true and authentic information through an honest dedication to objective reality whereby facts are reported conscientiously in their proper context, pointing out their essential connections and without causing distortions, with due deployment of the creative capacity of the journalist, so that the public is provided with adequate material to facilitate the formation of an accurate and comprehensive picture of the world in which the origin, nature,, and essence of events, processes, and states of affairs are understood as objectively as possible.

Principle III : The journalist’s social responsibility

Information in journalism is understood as social good and not as a commodity, which means that the journalist shares responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus accountable not only to those controlling the media but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist’s social responsibility requires that he or she will act under all circumstances in conformity with a personal ethical consciousness.

Principle IV : The journalist's professional integrity

The social role of the journalist demands that the profession maintain high standards of integrity, including the journalist's right to refrain from working against his or her conviction or from disclosing sources of information as well as the right to participate in the decision-making of the medium in which he or she is employed. The integrity of the profession does not permit the journalist to accept any form of bribe or the promotion of any private interest contrary to the general welfare. Likewise it belongs to professional ethics to respect intellectual property and, in particular, to refrain from plagiarism.

Principle V: Public access and participation

The nature of the profession demands that the journalist promote access by the public to information and participation of the public in the media, including the right of correction or rectification and the right of reply.

Principle VI : Respect for privacy and human dignity

An integral part of the professional standards of the journalist is respect for the right of the individual to privacy and human dignity, in conformity with provisions of international and national law concerning the protection of the rights and the reputation of others, prohibiting libel, calumny, slander, and defamation.

Principle VII : Respect for public interest

The professional standards of the journalist prescribe due respect for the national community, its democratic institutions, and public morals.

Principle VIII : Respect for universal values and diversity of cultures

A true journalist stands for the universal values of humanism, above all peace, democracy, human rights, social progress, and national liberation, while respecting the distinctive character, value, and dignity of each culture, as well as the right of each people freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic, and cultural systems. Thus, the journalist participates actively in the social transformation towards democratic betterment of society and contributes through dialogue to a climate of confidence in international relations conducive to peace and justice everywhere, to détente, disarmament, and national development. It belongs to the ethics of the profession that the journalist be aware of relevant provisions contained in international conventions, declarations, and resolutions.

Principle IX: Elimination of war and other great evils confronting humanity

The ethical commitment to the universal values of humanism calls for the journalist to abstain from any justification for, or incitement to, wars of

aggression and the arms race, especially in nuclear weapons, and all other forms of violence, hatred, or discrimination, especially racialism and apartheid, oppression by tyrannical regimes, colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as other great evils which afflict humanity, such as poverty, malnutrition, and diseases. By so doing, the journalist can help eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding among peoples, make nationals of a country sensitive to the needs and desires of others, ensure the respect for the rights and dignity of all nations, all peoples and all individuals without distinction of race, sex, language, nationality, religion, or philosophical conviction.

Principle X: Promotion of a new world information and communication order

The journalist operates in the contemporary world within the framework of a movement towards new international relations in general and a new information order in particular. This new order, understood as an integral part of the New International Economic Order, is aimed at the de-colonization and democratization of the field of information and communication, both nationally and internationally, on the basis of peaceful coexistence among peoples and with full respect for their cultural identity. The journalist has a special obligation to promote the process of democratization of international relations in the field of information, in particular by safeguarding and fostering peaceful and friendly relations among States and peoples.

The latest UNESCO World Trends Report Insights discussion paper “Threats that Silence: Trends in the Safety of Journalists”³⁰ highlights how surveillance and hacking are compromising journalism. This was vividly shown in exposés by investigative journalists and researchers, giving rise to UN human rights experts calling for a temporary global moratorium on the sale and transfer of surveillance technology.

The growing sophistication and undetectability of mal- and spyware and their increasing use against journalists and human rights defenders by state and non-state actors, endanger free, and independent journalism.

Surveillance can expose information gathered by journalists, including from whistle-blowers, and violates the principle of source protection, which is universally considered a prerequisite for freedom of the media and is enshrined in UN Resolutions. Surveillance may also harm the safety of journalists by disclosing sensitive private information which could be used for arbitrary judicial harassment or attack.³¹

“The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression presented in May 2019 findings and concerns on surveillance and human rights, noting that ‘surveillance of individuals – often journalists, activists, opposition figures, critics and others exercising their right to freedom of expression – has been shown to lead to arbitrary detention, sometimes to torture and possibly to extrajudicial killings.’”³²

“Between 2011 and 2021, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recorded dozens of incidents of journalists being targeted by spyware. This finding was supported by investigative journalism and fact-checking organizations uncovering the fact that hundreds of journalists had been selected as targets.”³³

“AI-powered surveillance of journalists’ movements, and trolling of journalists powered by data-mining and automated attacks, also threaten the free exercise of journalism. Reduced costs means that illegitimate surveillance operations undertaken by governmental or private actors can be broader, disproportionate, more invasive and longer lasting than ever before, without journalists or their sources being aware of them or being able to defend themselves.

Privacy is a pre-requisite for journalists to do their work and ensuring our access to fact-based and reliable information. It is a necessity if they are to communicate freely with sources, receive confidential information, investigate corruption, and guarantee the safety of themselves and their sources.”

“Increased reliance on digital services means that citizens often unknowingly share private information and data in exchange for free services. Individuals’ data leaves behind a ‘digital footprint’ that can be analysed in real time or ex-post by hostile and illegitimate actors.

Moreover, data held by Internet and cybersurveillance companies about personal lives can often be obtained by authorities without adequate due process or transparency.

There is a growing global push encouraging more transparency regarding how Internet companies exploit citizens’ data, how it informs predictive models and artificial intelligence, and enables amplification of disinformation and hatred.”

“More transparency by Internet companies such as in the use of “ad tech” could help news media with viability issues, as well as with their negotiations for a share in the revenues that are generated through online news appearing on their platforms.

Greater transparency, and better privacy protection, would also advance accountability of the Internet companies, and enhance public understanding of the online ecosystem. In turn, this could lead to greater trust that digital communications do justice to availing reliable content such as free and professional journalism.”³⁴

“There is a growing awareness and mobilization of citizens, media workers and organizations, pushing to reclaim data privacy and ownership, and to ensure transparency as part of the solution to arbitrary surveillance, weakened news media viability, and a decline in public trust.”³⁵

Gandhi’s Principles as Editor, Journalist, and Publisher

When in his 1965 pioneer work about Gandhi as journalist,³⁶ Sailendra Nath Bhattacharyya summarized “in retrospect and prospect” the deficiencies and

flaws in modern journalism according to Gandhi's opinion, he remarkably anticipated basic issues and problems of magazines and newspapers:

Since 1903, Gandhiji, through his journals the *Indian Opinion*, the *Young India*, the *Navajivan* and the *Harijan*, not only propagate his views, but, in the process, laid down a standard for journalists to emulate. While running his papers, his idea was to educate the people so that they could understand not only the significance of independence – political, economic and social – but also participate actively in freeing humanity from the bondage it was in. His motto, as a journalist, was service.

As a believer in divine Truth, to Gandhi means were as important as ends; that is why he did not take a short-term view of anything and he did not care for quick or spectacular success: “His was a steady and sure process with a clear-cut objective.” His secretary Henry Solomon Leon Polak recalled stories when Gandhi insisted on the high standard of responsibility while editing *Indian Opinion* with *The Times* in London in his mind. Gandhi appealed to journalists to confess their errors to avoid untruth in their writings. That is why he corrected previous mistakes as errata. He ran his papers on the financial support of his readers and subscribers, not on advertisements or other sales promotion methods.

Gandhi identified with the common man, with the mute millions whose aspirations journalists should give a loud voice in the public arena. He talked to the people, not at the people, it was a communion with the people. He used the language of the common people to “describe truth” as a ceaseless effort, “passion free in thought, speech and action; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion.”

Gandhi inspired many Indian language papers, because he chose to publish his weekly in South Africa in Hindi, Tamil, and Gujarati – later Gandhi, according to D.G. Tendulkar, summarized the journalist's ethos in democracy this way:

What is really needed to make democracy to function is not the knowledge of facts, but right education. And the true function of journalism is to educate the public mind, not to stock the public mind with wanted and unwanted impressions. A journalist has, therefore, to use his discretion, as to what to report and when. As it is, the journalists are not content to stick to the facts alone. Journalism has become the art of “intelligent anticipation of events.”

That is why authentication and verification of facts became the rule, against “a double evil – the suppression of the facts and concoction.” The Press as the Fourth Estate did not allow any journalist to allow bias in news presentation or misuse his or her power otherwise, which would be criminal and because

it would be a journalist's mission to uphold the truth. And Bhattacharyya concludes his book on Gandhi as a journalist with a posthumous dedication in *Harijan*:

All work in whatsoever sphere was a means primarily of service in Gandhiji's eyes. Newspapers and journals can build up a fitting memorial to him in this matter by conforming or trying to conform to the unimpeachable standards of journalism practised by our revered and beloved leader. (*Harijan*, March 29, 1948)

Let us focus on the beginning of Gandhi's experience as a newspaper reader: during his student days in London, after his arrival in September 1888, he spent hours reading the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily News*, and the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

His friendship with the members of the London Vegetarian Society afforded him an opportunity to write for its organ the *Vegetarian*. He contributed, during his stay of about three years in England, nine articles on diet, customs, festivals, etc., of the Indians. These are his earliest writing on record.

Thus, it does not astonish us to find out his first article, published in the issue of February 7, 1891, under the caption: "Indian Vegetarian." In this context, Gandhi emphasized cow protection and worship as the basis of Indian vegetarianism.

As early as 1896, Gandhi came to the conclusion that publicity was the best and perhaps the only weapon of defence for Indians. G.P. Pillay, editor of *The Madras Standard*, received background material for editorials by Gandhi, as a master of details and hard facts. Mr. Chesney, editor of *The Pioneer*, Allahabad, editorially commented on Gandhi's *Green Pamphlet*, wherein he described and ventilated the grievances of Indians in South Africa. Dadabhai Naoroji, representative of the Indian community in England, had started the journal *India*, and Gandhi became the journal's "Durban, Johannesburg and South Africa correspondent."

In 1897, Gandhi commented on the famine in India in a letter to the editor of *The Natal Mercury* (February 2, 1897). During the Second Boer War, after October 1899, Gandhi recorded his experience as a stretcher-bearer for publication in *The Times of India*. "Gandhi was [...] a detailed chronicler, mostly confined to the activities of the Indian Ambulance Corps."

I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper – it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as

through the *Indian Opinion*, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle.³⁷

Madanjit Vyaharik, ex-schoolmaster of Bombay and co-worker of Gandhi, established "The International Printing Press" at 113 Grey Street, Durban, in 1998. Brochures and pamphlets of the Natal Indian Congress were printed here. *Indian Opinion*, the weekly, was started here with first issue on June 4, 1903. The first editorial "Ourselves" was written by Gandhi himself with a desire "to promote harmony and good-will between the different sections of the one mighty Empire."

"This weekly newspaper is published in four languages, namely English, Gujarati, Tamil and Hindi in the interests of the British Indians residing in South Africa." The policy of the paper was to promote the cause of the British Indian in the sub-continent, as members of a mighty Empire with citizen's responsibilities, under one flag, for all sections of the British Indian society in their own languages, in all parts of South Africa, with an epitome of events happening in India, to give commercial intelligence, with contributions from competent writers, Indians, and Europeans, on all subjects – social, moral, and intellectual. Europeans – as "true Imperialists" – would benefit to get an idea of Indian thought and aspirations, with the best advertising medium in branches of Indian trade. Madanjit Vyaharik was the proprietor of *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi himself contributed articles and money for the weekly which he invested, nearly 3,500 Pounds until 1905. Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar, a journalist from Bombay, was appointed the editor until his death in January 1906. He carried on his shoulders the lion share of the editorial burden, with moderate policy and sound news.

The Phoenix Settlement – 14 miles away from Durban town and 21 miles from the Phoenix Railway Station – became the new address, the first issue was on December 24, 1904, printed on a treadle machine, all members of the farm received the same wage of 3 Pounds. Three Englishmen assisted in printing and publication of the paper: Mr Albert West, who owned a printing press in Johannesburg, Mr Herbert Kitchen, an electrical contractor, and Mr Henry Solomon Leon Polak, a man of simplicity and secretary of Gandhi, while John Cordes cared for the moral education of the children and the well-being of the settlement workers with a steam bath.

That is why we recognize that the origin of Sarvodaya and Satyagraha was inseparably linked with Gandhi as editor and journalist who wrote editorials for *Indian Opinion*, which was printed and published at Phoenix Settlement as a collaborative project of Indians and Europeans in South Africa, with the printer John Langalibalele Dube and his wife Nokutela as neighbors at the Ohlange Institute at Inanda, nowadays KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, a confluence of great souls following the great example of Booker T. Washington in favour of emancipation by education through vocational training.

Notes

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