



Mahatma Gandhi's Contribution To Journalism: Ethics, Activism, And The Mission Of The Press

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's legacy is inextricably linked with non-violence, truth, and the Indian freedom movement. However, an equally compelling aspect of his work lies in his contribution to journalism and the press. Gandhi envisioned journalism as a tool for public service, a vehicle for social change, and a moral enterprise that should be guided by truth, restraint, and commitment to public welfare. This research paper examines Gandhi's multifaceted role as a journalist, editor, and media ethicist, focusing on the newspapers he published—Indian Opinion, Young India, Navjivan, and Harijan. Using a qualitative methodology rooted in content analysis of his writings and historical texts, the paper explores Gandhi's philosophy of journalism, his use of multilingual media, rejection of advertising, and editorial policies grounded in service rather than profit. The study also evaluates Gandhi's views on media ethics, language politics, community representation, and the press's role in national awakening. It offers a critical analysis of how his model of journalism contrasts with today's market-driven media environment and proposes how his values remain relevant in contemporary media discourse.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Journalism Ethics, Non-violence, Indian Freedom Movement, Press Activism

1. Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi was not only a political leader and social reformer but also a journalist of exceptional insight and integrity. His commitment to ethical journalism and its role in nation-building remains unparalleled in Indian history. From launching Indian Opinion in South Africa in 1903 to editing Young India, Navjivan, and Harijan in pre-independent India, Gandhi consistently used the press as a powerful instrument to promote truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and social justice. Gandhi's philosophy of journalism was intrinsically linked with his larger ethical framework. He saw journalism not as a profession for profit but as a sacred mission to serve the people and uphold moral values. His newspapers not only reported news but also educated, mobilized, and created a national consciousness. His emphasis on truth, simplicity in language, and inclusivity laid a unique foundation for an idealistic model of journalism.

This research paper explores Gandhi's unique approach to journalism in a period of political turmoil and media censorship. It evaluates how his media practices influenced political communication and mass mobilization and offers a critical perspective on the relevance of Gandhian journalism in contemporary digital times.

The central problem addressed in this study is how Gandhi's model of journalism—rooted in service, non-commercialism, and ethical responsibility—contrasts with the prevailing models of journalism driven by profit and sensationalism. At a time when misinformation, clickbait, and corporate ownership plague global journalism, revisiting Gandhi's practices can help revive ethical journalism.

This study is significant because it fills a critical gap in understanding Gandhi not just as a political leader, but as a transformative journalist who reshaped the Indian media narrative with limited resources but immense moral clarity.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the philosophical and ethical foundations of Gandhi's journalism.
2. To explore Gandhi's editorial practices and innovations in multilingual publishing.
3. To assess the social and political impact of Gandhi's newspapers.
4. To evaluate Gandhi's views on media responsibility, advertising, and public service.
5. To reflect on the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's journalistic vision.

1.2 Research Questions

- What were Gandhi's core journalistic principles, and how were they reflected in his editorial work?
- How did Gandhi use the press as a tool of resistance and reform?
- What innovations did Gandhi introduce in journalism (e.g., multilingual publishing, subscription models)?
- How does Gandhi's model of journalism contrast with commercial media practices today?

2. Literature Review

The existing literature on Gandhi's contribution to journalism reflects a rich interdisciplinary engagement with themes such as media ethics, political communication, and press history.

2.1 Early Works and Ethical Principles

Iyengar (1950) acknowledges Gandhi's press as the moral backbone of the freedom struggle, noting that Gandhi transformed journalism from a career into a mission of truth. S. Natarajan (1962) highlighted the influence of Navjivan in promoting regional journalism and moral uprightness.

Gandhi's own writings, especially *Hind Swaraj* (1921), emphasized the educational role of the press. He warned against the commercialization of newspapers and asserted that "the sole aim of journalism should be service." He critiqued the use of advertisements and trivial content that compromised journalistic integrity.

2.2 Contemporary Interpretations

Basu (2020) frames Gandhi's journalism within the realm of ethical communication, stating that his editorial restraint and moral commitment are benchmarks for responsible media. Singh (2021) draws comparisons between Gandhi's journalism and modern practices, arguing that Gandhi's model prioritized civic responsibility over profit.

Chandrasekhar (2019) focuses on the role of Indian Opinion in community integration in South Africa, especially through multilingual editions in Gujarati, Tamil, and English. According to Saxena (2021), Gandhi's multilingual approach democratized access to media and emphasized inclusivity.

2.3 Language and Communication

Tushar Arun Gandhi (2018) states that Gandhi's choice of plain, direct language bridged class divides. Gandhi's consistent use of accessible language in both elite and mass settings allowed his messages to resonate across linguistic and socioeconomic barriers.

2.4 Challenges to Modern Journalism

Mehta (2021) and Ganguly (2020) critique the growing corporatization of media, contrasting it with Gandhi's ideal that journalism should be guided by truth, not market interests. Raju (1990) posits that Gandhi's rejection of advertisements was a revolutionary act that protected editorial independence.

This literature review affirms the significance of Gandhi's contributions to ethical, linguistic, and public-service journalism, establishing a foundation for a deeper analytical exploration.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical research design. The primary methodology is content analysis of Gandhi's writings, editorials, and speeches concerning the press. This is supplemented by secondary sources, including academic journals, biographies, and historical texts.

Case Study Approach: Gandhi's major publications—Indian Opinion, Navjivan, Young India, and Harijan—serve as key case studies to examine editorial content, language use, and ethical frameworks.

Textual Sources: The study refers to Gandhi's Collected Works, Hind Swaraj, and Harijan editorials, and corroborates insights through historical writings by A.S. Iyengar, S. Natarajan, and Salien Chatterjee.

Scope and Limitations: This paper does not include interviews, surveys, or statistical tools. It is a theoretical and historical exploration of Gandhi's journalistic legacy within the Indian and colonial contexts.

4. Analysis and Discussions

4.1 Gandhi's Philosophy of Journalism

Gandhi approached journalism as a form of public service rather than a profession. His guiding principle was truthfulness—not just in fact but in spirit. To him, journalism was a sacred trust between the writer and society. He considered three objectives for newspapers:

1. To understand and express public sentiment
2. To cultivate moral values
3. To expose societal flaws fearlessly. His writings rejected sensationalism and emphasized moderation, even in criticism.

Gandhi discouraged the pursuit of profit through journalism. He considered it unethical for newspapers to carry advertisements that contradicted their editorial principles.

He wrote in Harijan (1933), “You will note that no advertisements are being taken for the upkeep of the paper. It has to depend only upon the subscriptions received.”

4.2 Case Studies of Gandhi’s Newspapers

Indian Opinion (1903–1914)

Founded in South Africa, Indian Opinion became Gandhi’s first laboratory in ethical journalism. It addressed issues faced by the Indian diaspora and promoted solidarity across communities. The paper was multilingual—published in English, Gujarati, Tamil, and Hindi—ensuring wide accessibility.

TV Madanjit, its proprietor, hoped the European population would better understand Indian grievances through this publication. Gandhi used it as a mouthpiece to educate the community about civil rights, hygiene, and satyagraha.

Young India and Navjivan

Young India (English) and Navjivan (Gujarati) became Gandhi’s main platforms in India. These papers covered socio-political issues, nationalist thought, and Gandhi’s views on self-reliance, education, and rural upliftment. His editorial tone was persuasive but never inflammatory.

Navjivan uplifted Gujarati language journalism. It inspired a wave of vernacular journalism grounded in ethics and service. Gandhi encouraged his son Manilal, the Gujarati editor of Indian Opinion, to be patient and truthful, avoiding anger and haste.

Harijan (1933 onwards)

Launched to campaign against untouchability, Harijan and its regional counterparts (Harijan Bandhu, Harijan Sevak) focused on Dalit rights and social reform. Gandhi explicitly avoided advertisements in this paper and requested readers to pay subscriptions in advance to maintain financial independence. These publications exemplified the use of journalism as an instrument of social change, particularly for marginalized voices.

Timeline of Mahatma Gandhi’s Journalism Journey

Year	Event
1891	Gandhi returned to India from England after studying law.
1893	Gandhi moved to South Africa for legal work and witnessed racial discrimination.
1903	Launch of Indian Opinion, a multilingual weekly newspaper published in English, Gujarati, Tamil, and Hindi in South Africa.
1914	Returned to India from South Africa, bringing his experience of media and journalism.
1919	Began publishing Young India, which became a key tool for political commentary and nationalist ideas.
1920	Took over and renamed Navajivan, a Gujarati weekly focusing on swadeshi, education, and social reform.
1933	Founded Harijan, Harijan Bandhu (Gujarati), and Harijan Sevak (Hindi) to combat untouchability and promote social unity.
1947	Gandhi delivered his only radio broadcast from AIR Delhi on the eve of independence.
1948	Last articles published in Harijan before his assassination in January.

Major Publications by Gandhi as Editor

Publication Name	Language(s)	Focus	Role
Indian Opinion	Gujarati, English, Tamil, Hindi	Indian rights in South Africa, Satyagraha	Founder and Editor
Young India	English	Freedom struggle, ethics, non-violence	Editor
Navajivan	Gujarati	Self-reliance, rural reform, education	Editor
Harijan	English	Upliftment of Harijans (Dalits), national integration	Editor
Harijanbandhu	Gujarati	Regional social issues and constructive work	Editor
Harijan Sevak	Hindi	Mass communication of Gandhian ideas	Editor

4.3 Gandhi's Ethical Code for Editors

Gandhi believed the editor must embody truth, restraint, and responsibility. His communication was always moderate, even when critiquing opponents. In *Young India* (1925), he said: "To be true to my faith, I may not write in anger or spite. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion."

He promoted transparency and rejected misleading or unverified news. He believed in the press's educational role and argued that unverifiable reports should not be published at all. Gandhi was against medical and sensational advertisements. He found many misleading and harmful. He criticized the hypocrisy of newspapers that condemned harmful substances like alcohol while simultaneously promoting them in ads.

4.4 Core Principles of Gandhian Journalism

- Truth (Satya):** Gandhi believed journalism must be a tool for seeking and serving truth.
- Non-violence (Ahimsa):** Journalism should never promote hatred or conflict.
- Self-restraint:** Language and tone should reflect balance and ethical conviction, not passion or malice.
- Service:** Journalism must be a mission of public service, not a business.
- No Advertisements:** Gandhi's newspapers relied solely on subscriptions to avoid commercial influence.
- Inclusivity and Simplicity:** Gandhi insisted on publishing in multiple languages and using plain, accessible language.
- Moral Responsibility:** Editors must be answerable to their conscience and to the people, not just to profits.

4.5 Gandhi and Mass Communication Strategy

Gandhi was an astute communicator who understood the power of media. His use of language was both accessible and dignified. Whether addressing peasants in Champaran or elites in Bombay, he used the same language and tone, making his communication inclusive and persuasive.

He also used radio. In his only radio broadcast from Delhi's Broadcasting House in 1947, he called radio “a miraculous power” capable of reaching the masses. After his assassination, All India Radio aired tributes from Nehru, Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu, and Lord Mountbatten.

4.6 Comparative Reflections and Contemporary Relevance

In today's era of clickbait, paid news, and post-truth narratives, Gandhi's model of journalism offers a corrective framework rooted in moral responsibility. His focus on editorial independence, media literacy, and service to truth is more relevant than ever.

Media ethics courses today invoke Gandhian ideals while grappling with AI-generated news, deepfakes, and political propaganda. His subscription-only model and rejection of ads anticipated today's reader-supported journalism platforms. Gandhi's emphasis on inclusivity and regional language journalism offers a template for media democratization in multilingual societies like India.

5. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's journey in journalism was not merely that of an editor or writer—it was a deeply ethical and revolutionary extension of his larger mission for truth, justice, and national awakening. He recognized early on the transformative power of the press to shape public opinion, to mobilize civil resistance, and to disseminate ideas that challenged colonial hegemony and social injustices. His work in *Indian Opinion*, *Young India*, *Navajivan*, and *Harijan* was not only about communicating information but about cultivating a moral conscience within both readers and the larger society. Gandhi's vision of journalism stood in stark contrast to the profit-driven and sensationalist tendencies that dominate much of modern media. For him, journalism was a sacred duty—an ethical mission rather than a career. He rejected advertisements, commercial endorsements, and even excessive editorial freedom when it risked compromising moral restraint. In an age where speed and spectacle increasingly define media narratives, Gandhi's model urges a return to journalism as an instrument of truth and public service. One of the most notable aspects of Gandhi's contribution was his belief in simplicity—both in language and presentation. He communicated in a tone that was as accessible to rural farmers as it was to urban elites. He emphasized multilingual communication, ensuring that Indian communities across language barriers could find representation and voice through his publications. The format and frequency of his writings, which often addressed complex social issues with directness and humility, stand as pedagogical examples of how journalism can be inclusive without losing intellectual and ethical depth.

Gandhi's legacy in journalism is also profoundly instructional in terms of editorial responsibility. His writings demonstrate how editorial leadership can influence public morality, civic responsibility, and the national discourse. He was acutely aware of the dangers of misinformation, commercial manipulation, and irresponsible reporting. Even as he exercised immense influence, Gandhi practiced restraint, often avoiding inflammatory language and instead inviting readers to reflect and act in the spirit of truth and non-violence. In the context of contemporary India and global media environments rife with disinformation, clickbait content, corporate influence, and polarized narratives, Gandhi's principles remain not just relevant but urgent. His life invites a re-imagining of journalism as an instrument of societal transformation rather than just a business or entertainment model. While the technology and platforms have evolved—from newsprint to digital bytes—the fundamental ethical questions Gandhi grappled with endure: Who controls the narrative? Whose voice is amplified? What is the duty of the press?

Thus, Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to journalism goes beyond history. It becomes a living framework—an ethical compass for journalists, educators, media institutions, and readers alike. His work challenges us to re-embed moral clarity, public service, and self-

restraint in media practices. In a world saturated with information but often devoid of wisdom, Gandhi's journalism reminds us that what we write, publish, and circulate has the power not only to inform but to uplift, liberate, and heal.

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