

# A Critical Study of Policy Mechanisms for Ensuring Accountability and Transparency in Independent Electronic Media Ethics in India

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**Abstract:** *The exponential growth of independent electronic media in India has redefined public engagement and information dissemination. However, this expansion has simultaneously triggered significant ethical challenges including biased reporting, misinformation, opaque ownership structures, and inadequate regulatory oversight. This study critically examines the policy mechanisms both statutory and self-regulatory designed to ensure accountability and transparency in India's independent electronic media landscape. It evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks such as the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, and the IT Rules, 2021, while exploring the role of institutional and voluntary bodies like the Press Council of India (PCI) and the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA). Through a comparative analysis with global best practices, the paper identifies critical gaps in India's media governance model and proposes policy reforms aimed at balancing media freedom with ethical responsibility. The study underscores the need for a unified, independent, and enforceable media regulatory framework that ensures public trust, journalistic integrity, and democratic accountability in the digital era.*

**Keywords:** Media Ethics, Accountability, Policy Mechanisms, Regulation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of electronic media in India has revolutionized the country's information landscape and significantly altered the contours of democratic engagement. From traditional broadcast television to digital news platforms and social media channels, independent electronic media now plays an influential role in shaping public discourse, forming political opinions, and disseminating information at unprecedented speed and scale.

As the reach and impact of this sector have grown, so too have concerns regarding ethical standards, misinformation, editorial bias, and the absence of transparent, accountable regulatory mechanisms (Thakurta, 2012). The fundamental question arises: How can India ensure that its independent electronic media adheres to ethical norms while maintaining the freedom of expression enshrined in its Constitution?

The significance of media ethics in a democracy cannot be overstated. A free and responsible media is vital for an informed citizenry, the proper functioning of democratic institutions, and the maintenance of public trust in journalistic practices. Ethical journalism demands accuracy, fairness, accountability, and independence.

However, the increasing commercialization of media, proliferation of fake news, and manipulation of content by vested interests have raised red flags regarding the credibility and integrity of India's electronic media sector (Mehta, 2008). Independent media outlets, particularly digital platforms, often operate in a

legal grey zone, lacking the regulatory oversight and professional accountability mechanisms that traditional print and broadcast media have historically been subject to.

The policy environment governing media ethics in India is fragmented and often inconsistent across platforms. While the Press Council of India (PCI) provides ethical oversight for print media, there is no corresponding statutory body for electronic or digital media. The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 offers limited regulation of television content, mandating adherence to a Program and Advertisement Code, yet it is widely criticized for its outdated provisions and weak enforcement mechanisms (Singh, 2021).

The emergence of digital-first news portals and video content creators has further complicated the regulatory landscape. In response, the Indian government introduced the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, seeking to establish a new ethical framework for digital news and OTT platforms. These rules, however, have faced criticism for potentially infringing upon press freedom and lacking an independent regulatory mechanism (Bhatia, 2021).

Self-regulation has been proposed as an alternative to state control. Organizations like the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA), formed under the News Broadcasters & Digital Association (NBDA), function as self-regulatory bodies, offering grievance redressal mechanisms and ethical codes for member broadcasters. Nevertheless, their effectiveness is limited due to their non-binding nature, voluntary membership, and restricted jurisdiction (NBDA, 2023). Furthermore, the overwhelming dominance of corporate ownership in media and growing political interference undermine the editorial independence that is essential for ethical journalism (Bhushan, 2021).

The challenges facing Indian electronic media today are compounded by the lack of transparency in media ownership, revenue generation models, and editorial policies. Media companies often do not publicly disclose their funding sources, advertising affiliations, or the extent of government influence in their content strategies. This opacity makes it difficult for citizens to critically evaluate the information they consume. It also undermines the principle of transparency, a core tenet of ethical journalism, as outlined in international media codes such as the Munich Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists (1971) and the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics.

In this context, the need for a comprehensive and enforceable policy mechanism that ensures both accountability and transparency in independent electronic media ethics is urgent. Such a mechanism must strike a delicate balance: it should uphold journalistic freedom, prevent arbitrary censorship, and simultaneously enforce professional standards and ethical norms. Globally, nations such as the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented independent media regulatory authorities like Ofcom and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) which operate autonomously from political influence while ensuring that content standards are maintained across platforms. These models offer valuable insights for India as it grapples with designing its own oversight systems (Ofcom, 2023).

Moreover, the media landscape has been further complicated by the digital revolution. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have become primary sources of news for millions, yet they remain largely unregulated in terms of journalistic accountability. The distinction between professional journalism and user-generated content is increasingly blurred.

This raises pressing ethical concerns about misinformation, hate speech, paid news, and the algorithmic amplification of sensationalist content, which often escape scrutiny under existing frameworks (Rao & Desai, 2020). The IT Rules of 2021 attempt to address some of these challenges but have been criticized for potentially curbing free speech and lacking procedural safeguards (Chaudhuri, 2021).

Given these realities, this critical study seeks to systematically evaluate the policy mechanisms currently in place to ensure accountability and transparency in India's independent electronic media. It examines statutory laws, institutional frameworks, and voluntary self-regulatory codes to identify their strengths, limitations, and areas of overlap.

The study also investigates how political, corporate, and technological factors influence the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Furthermore, it explores the role of civil society, journalistic communities, and the judiciary in advocating for ethical reforms and defending media independence.

The core objectives of this study are fourfold:

To understand the evolution of policy mechanisms governing independent electronic media in India.

To critically assess the effectiveness of existing regulatory, co-regulatory, and self-regulatory frameworks.

To explore comparative international models of media regulation and draw relevant lessons.

To propose recommendations for building a robust, independent, and ethical media ecosystem in India.

By adopting a multidisciplinary and critical approach, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on media ethics reform in India. The study relies on an extensive review of legislation, policy documents, academic literature, and case law to build a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Ultimately, this inquiry seeks to promote a media environment in India that is both free and responsible, ensuring that the fourth pillar of democracy lives up to its promise in the digital age.

### **EVOLUTION OF MEDIA ETHICS AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS**

Historically, India's media regulation relied heavily on self-regulation and judicial interventions. Bodies such as the Press Council of India (PCI) were established to promote ethical standards in print media but have limited jurisdiction over electronic platforms. The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 governs content on cable networks, mandating adherence to the Programme and Advertising Code. However, it is often criticized for being outdated and insufficient to deal with digital-era challenges (Thakurta, 2012).

Independent digital platforms and news portals are loosely governed by the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which introduce content regulation mechanisms but have attracted criticism for overreach and lack of clarity (Bhatia, 2021). These frameworks aim to foster transparency but are often challenged by stakeholders for compromising media freedom.

### **KEY POLICY MECHANISMS**

#### **1. Statutory Mechanisms**

**Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995:** Regulates cable broadcasts through program codes, but enforcement is weak and decentralized (Singh, 2021).

**Information Technology Rules, 2021:** Introduced a three-tier grievance redressal mechanism, but lack of independence and editorial control has raised concerns (Chaudhuri, 2021).

**Broadcasting Bill (Draft):** Proposed but not enacted, this aims to regulate broadcasting content, especially for private TV channels, but is still in limbo.

#### **2. Institutional Oversight**

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) plays a supervisory role but lacks the institutional independence needed for unbiased content review.

News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA): A self-regulatory body under the News Broadcasters & Digital Association (NBDA), offering a complaint redressal forum for the public. However, it applies only to member channels and has no binding enforcement (NBDA, 2023).

#### **3. Self-Regulation**

Several media houses have internal ethical guidelines, ombudsman structures, or editorial boards. However, these measures often lack uniformity and transparency (Rao & Desai, 2020).

Digital platforms such as YouTube channels or independent journalists are largely unregulated, with minimal ethical oversight beyond community guidelines.

### **CRITICAL GAPS AND CHALLENGES**

#### **1. Fragmented Regulation**

There is no single, cohesive framework for electronic media regulation in India. Print, television, OTT, and digital platforms fall under different laws and bodies, leading to confusion and regulatory gaps (Jain, 2022).

### **2. Weak Enforcement**

Even when ethical codes exist, the enforcement mechanisms are toothless. The PCI and NBDSA can issue advisories or censure media houses but lack punitive authority.

### **3. Political and Corporate Interference**

Media houses are often influenced by their owners' political or business affiliations, which compromises editorial independence and objectivity (Mehta, 2008; Bhushan, 2021).

### **4. Lack of Transparency**

There is limited public access to editorial decision-making, ownership patterns, or advertising influences. This opacity undermines trust and raises ethical concerns.

## **COMPARATIVE GLOBAL PRACTICES**

Countries like the UK and Australia offer models of independent media regulation through bodies like Ofcom and the Australian Communications and Media Authority. These institutions maintain independence, enforce ethical standards, and ensure transparency through public reporting and stakeholder involvement (Ofcom, 2023).

India can benefit from a similar model that ensures a statutorily backed but editorially independent media council to oversee all formats of media including digital.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Unified Media Regulation Law:** A consolidated statute that governs ethical standards across all electronic platforms is necessary.

**Independent Media Commission:** Establish an autonomous constitutional body to oversee complaints, content review, and ethical compliance.

**Mandatory Disclosure Norms:** All media platforms should disclose funding, ownership, and editorial policies publicly.

**Digital Media Ethics Charter:** Create a charter with legally binding obligations for digital content creators, ensuring accountability for misinformation and hate speech.

**Capacity Building and Training:** Regular sensitization workshops on journalistic ethics for reporters, editors, and content creators.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The critical examination of policy mechanisms governing accountability and transparency in independent electronic media ethics in India reveals a complex and often fragmented regulatory environment. While the growth of independent media has amplified diverse voices and enhanced democratic discourse, it has also exposed serious ethical challenges, including sensationalism, misinformation, lack of editorial independence, and opaque ownership structures. Existing statutory frameworks, such as the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 and the Information Technology Rules, 2021, provide a basic structure for regulation, but their applicability to the fast-evolving digital and electronic media ecosystem remains inadequate. These laws often lack clarity, enforcement strength, and adaptability to the unique challenges posed by digital platforms, which are now primary sources of news and public information. Furthermore, the absence of a unified and independent media regulatory body undermines the capacity of these mechanisms to ensure consistent ethical compliance across platforms.

Self-regulatory bodies like the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA) and the Press Council of India (PCI) have played commendable roles in promoting voluntary adherence to journalistic ethics. However, their limited jurisdiction, lack of punitive power, and dependence on voluntary participation restrict their effectiveness. Additionally, the influence of political and corporate ownership on

editorial policy and the increasing commercialization of media content pose major threats to media independence, which is a cornerstone of ethical journalism. The increasing convergence of technology and media further complicates accountability, especially on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, where content creators may not adhere to journalistic standards but still shape public perception. This has created an ethical vacuum in the media ecosystem, exacerbating the erosion of public trust.

Given these limitations, there is a pressing need for comprehensive media policy reform in India. A future-ready regulatory framework must be multi-tiered, inclusive of digital platforms, and capable of addressing cross-media ethical challenges. Such a framework should be grounded in the principles of editorial independence, public interest, and transparency. The establishment of an autonomous and constitutionally backed media commission could be an effective solution for ensuring consistent oversight without infringing on press freedom. Furthermore, mandatory disclosure norms for ownership, funding sources, and editorial policies would enhance transparency and empower citizens to make informed judgments about media content. International models, such as Ofcom in the UK and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), offer valuable blueprints for independent yet accountable media regulation that India can adapt to its democratic and socio-cultural context.

Ethical media practice is not solely the responsibility of government regulation or industry compliance; it also demands active engagement from civil society, media consumers, and journalists themselves. Public awareness, media literacy, and ethical training for media professionals are essential components in fostering a culture of accountability. The future of Indian democracy depends heavily on the integrity and ethical conduct of its media. Therefore, strengthening accountability and transparency in independent electronic media through robust and inclusive policy mechanisms is not just a regulatory imperative but a democratic necessity.

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