

May 12, 2016

All Members of NBA

Re: Letter dated 15.1.2016 received from the Under Secretary (BC.II), MoI&B regarding “Making of alleged fake news by Aaj Tak TV channel involving a child who was kicked by a Minister” : Advisory to Members

The above complaint and the response given by the broadcaster were considered by the NBSA at its meeting held 11.3.2016. As decided at the meeting, the complaint, response from the broadcaster and the decision taken by NBSA with regard to the complaint are being forwarded for your information and compliance.

Complaint :

MoI&B vide its letter dated 15.1.2016 had brought to the notice of NBA that it had come across creation of some 'fake news' by Aaj Tak TV. It stated that some TV channels and social media sites had shown a stringer/reporter of Aaj Tak TV channel inciting a boy (who was involved in an incident in which a Minister of State of Madhya Pradesh allegedly kicked the boy, earlier reported by the media), with an offer of liquor and money to make some 'tutored' statement on the incident. The footage showed that the boy was being aggressively prompted to make a statement as suggested by the reporter, much against his will. It was disturbing to see a traumatised child being subjected to inducements with attempts of coercion, to put words into his mouth and extract a particular description of an event suggested by the stringer. Even as the child was visibly sobbing and crying, the stringer of the channel was building up pressure on him to speak out 'his lines' followed by an offer of liquor. MoI&B stated that the stringer was “making’ fake news and appeared to have compromised the basic principles of journalism, which has been prominently enunciated by NBA in their Guidelines/Regulations. MoI&B requested action against Aajtak Channel, as it had violated the ‘Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards of NBA’ and the provisions of the “Guidelines for media reporting on Children” of NCPCR (duly approved by Hon’ble High Court of Delhi and circulated by MoI&B in 2012 and in turn circulated by NBA to its member channels) for compliance. MoI&B was of the view that even though Aajtak had not telecast the doctored and tutored version of the child, the very fact that its stringer was making attempts to 'create' news, raised the fundamental issue of journalistic ethics and methodology of TV reporting adopted by the electronic media. MoI&B has therefore requested that the issue be examined in the larger perspective of ethics in journalism. Along with letter dated 15.1.2016, MoI&B had also submitted transcript of the programme aired on Zee News channel on 4.11.2015, showing the alleged incident involving the stringer and the boy, along with Ministry's internal comments, which stated: “चूँकि आज तक ने बच्चे की वो बाईट नहीं दिखाई है, जो कि उसे स्ट्रिंगर द्वारा वीडियो में कहने के लिए सिखाया गया था। ऐसे में आज तक के खिलाफ केबल टेलीविज़न नेटवर्क नियमावली 1994 के उल्लंघन का मामला नहीं बनता है।”.

Response of Broadcaster :

The broadcaster stated that the statement of the boy was not aired by their channel Aajtak. It further stated that it believes in fair, impartial, objective and independent journalism and has always endeavoured to abide by the journalistic norms enshrined in the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards laid down by the News Broadcasters Association (NBA). The broadcaster informed NBA that on coming to know about the conduct of this stringer, necessary action had been taken against the concerned stringer and his service contract with TVTN has been terminated.

Decision:

NBSA noted with concern that the manner in which the stringer of Aajtak attempted to induce and tutor the child to make a statement was reprehensible conduct deserving criticism, as they violate the very basis of responsible and ethical journalism. NBSA was of the view that the action of any person representing or acting on behalf of a broadcaster, be it an editor, anchor, reporter or stringer, to coerce or browbeat someone, that too a child, with the object of obtaining any statement or allegation, was condemnable; and the fact that the statement obtained by such unethical means was not used, did not in any way mitigate the seriousness of the wrong conduct.

However, as the broadcaster has submitted that the action of the stringer was not with its knowledge, concurrence or authority and that the services of the stringer concerned had already been terminated for his unethical conduct, NBSA decided as follows:

- (i) To record and convey its displeasure to the broadcaster about the despicable incident involving its stringer, as it affects the credibility of the electronic media.
- (ii) To record and convey its concern about the lack of ethical training and journalistic integrity, disclosed by the incident.
- (iii) To direct the broadcaster to submit a photo copy of the termination letter issued to the stringer concerned, within one week of receipt of NBSA's letter communicating this decision.

NBSA also decided to inform all members that manufacturing, doctoring, tailoring, tutoring or creating any kind of false or fake news or any attempt to do so by any editor, anchor, reporter, stringer, employee or associate of a broadcaster, or any attempt to coerce, threaten and browbeat any person or institution, to extract false or distorted statements or allegations will be considered as serious misconduct on the part of the broadcaster, irrespective of whether any 'feed' or 'report' so generated/created is aired or not. It also decided to remind the broadcasters to brief, teach and inculcate ethical standards to its new employees (anchors, reporters and stringers) and also to hold refresher sessions about the same for the existing employees periodically.

Regards,



Annie Joseph
For & on behalf of NBSA

CC: Editors & Legal Heads of NBA