

## Paper

Gerret von Nordheim

# Means of power

## Gandhi's journalistic ethics

**Abstract:** Gandhi saw journalism as an irreplaceable means of power in his fight against oppression. As a publisher and deskman, he developed the ethical principles that are presented systematically in this paper. Even today, 150 years after Gandhi's birth, they still give us cause to reflect. Gandhi's principles are not those of a journalist who idealizes practice at a hypothetical level, nor those of a theorist guilty of creating an implausible utopia. Instead, they bear witness to a life spent dealing practically with the ethical problems of journalistic work. Given the increasing fragmentation and sense of outrage in today's society, his publications' absolute proximity to the reader – in both form and content – and his strict avoidance of unnecessary affectation appear almost prophetic. Other aspects appear stranger: Gandhi rarely reported on political events and rejected both advertising and the exercise of journalism as a profession.

»All my experience has convinced me,  
that there is no other God than truth.«

(Gandhi 1983: 257)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi sought both God and truth – without differentiating between the two. He saw the path to this God as truth in *ahimsa*, the perception that all life only finds completion in love. All his efforts were directed at this aim of personal fulfillment. But it was only the rare combination of this unconditional effort with a sense of the effect of the media that made him *Mahatma* Gandhi, the great soul, worshipped like a God, the outstanding figurehead of

non-violent struggle. Gandhi was a favorite among reporters, a victim of caricaturists, a wonderful stager, propagandist and, above all, a passionate journalist and publisher.

»I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and precept under severe restraint the use of matchless weapon of ›Satyagraha‹.« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 80)

Gandhi's top priority was not power *over others*, but *self-empowerment* (cf. Galting 1987: 170). This was one of the fundamental conditions of Satyagraha, as he called the non-violent struggle he practiced. Gandhi strove to break free of passion in his thoughts, words and deeds. He wanted to »make himself zero« (Gandhi 1983: 285). The self-control he practiced while fasting, for example, gave him the strength to influence others and exercise power. To put it less drastically, self-control was the prerequisite that allowed him to exercise a positive influence. And Gandhi's main way to exert influence – given that he avoided public speaking – was through the written word.

This inseparability of self-control and influence – of means and end – is expressed in the journalistic ethics that Gandhi developed during his time as a publisher and deskman. This paper will present his ethical principles. Today, 150 years after Gandhi's birth, they are especially pertinent – highlighting a third way between activism and objectivism in an age when journalists' attitudes are increasingly the subject of public debate. Gandhi instrumentalized journalism for his aims and yet – or perhaps therefore – made every effort to report truthfully.

Gandhi began his career as a journalist in South Africa and later continued in his homeland, India. In both countries in around 1900, newspapers were both the means and the object of confrontation in society. The British colonial government in India in particular was trying to nip the nationalism emerging among the population, largely expressed through the foundation of numerous newspapers in the national language, in the bud (Tamendehrou 2014: 30). Strict press laws were enacted again and again in an attempt to outlaw journalistic activities. At the same time, English language publications were supported as the mouthpiece of the government (Tamendehrou 2014: 32). In this febrile, polarized environment, Gandhi stressed the value of truth. It is this dialectic that makes his thoughts so topical in an age of rampant relativism.

Another reason why Gandhi's journalistic principles still deserve respect today is the fact that they were never simply theoretical considerations under ideal conditions but, like all his principles, had to stand up in practice. Gandhi put them into practice every day:

»Indian Opinion« reflected, just as »Young India« and »Navajivan«<sup>[1]</sup>, do today, part of my life. Week after week, I poured my heart into their columns and preached the principles and applications of Satyagraha. For ten years, [...] there was barely an edition without an article by me.« (Gandhi 1983: 115)

Gandhi's collected written works run to around ten million words (Galtung 1987: 63), a large part of which is made up of the articles he wrote during his forty-year career as a journalist. Starting with an outline of his biography, this paper examines what motivated Gandhi to this indefatigable journalistic activity. The main section of the article then traces the role that Gandhi's journalistic work played in the context of his political struggle, before illustrating and categorizing his journalistic and ethical principles in a structured way.

## 1. Gandhi's journalistic development: a biographical overview

As a child, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi received no more than an average education. He himself writes in his autobiography that he »was a very average student« (Gandhi 1983: 9), and his parents also seem to have shared little knowledge with him. This may seem surprising given his heritage – Gandhi's father was a chief minister, as were his father and grandfather before him. However, Mahatma Gandhi reports that his father received no education other than that gained through practical life, and knew nothing of history or geography (Gandhi 1983: 8). A lawyer friend stated that the 21-year-old Gandhi displayed a lack of general knowledge, knew »nothing of the world«, and had not even read the history of his country (Gandhi 1983: 54).

It is therefore no wonder that Gandhi paid little attention to the strongly politicized newspapers in India during his adolescence (Driessen 2002: 58) and had never even read a newspaper until he began his university studies in England (1888-1891) (Driessen 2002: 123). The young law student wanted to adapt to British society, bought the clothing of a gentleman and read the *Times* of London — which would shape his concept of good journalism (Bhattacharyya 1965: 71).

It was in London that Gandhi took his first tentative steps as a journalist. The texts he produced during this period were inspired by the problems he saw himself facing as a strict vegetarian in the new Western world. The promise he had made to his mother before leaving India – not to eat meat even when abroad – became a heavy burden for Gandhi in more ways than one. Not only did his first attempts to achieve a full, healthy vegetarian diet in England fail – British

1 *Indian Opinion* was Gandhi's newspaper in South Africa, *Young India* and *Navajivan* two of the three newspapers he published in India. He also later founded *Harijan*.

friends also tried to break Gandhi's »obstinacy« (Gandhi 1983: 41) and convince him to eat meat. The torture only ended when he finally met some like-minded people, joining a vegetarian society and even writing articles for its magazine.

It is indicative both of Gandhi's process of maturing as a journalist and of his concept of journalism that his first articles also report on the initial resistance he had to overcome in his new Western environment, testing his vow and his principles. Shy and initially extremely insecure, Gandhi went on to develop strong self-confidence and missionary zeal, which only increased as he replaced inner dilemmas with reinforced conviction.

Having graduated in law, Gandhi returned to India only briefly before traveling to South Africa in 1893 to gain professional experience. This was to set him on the path that would define his life. Various experiences of the racism prevalent in the colony at the time became turning points in Gandhi's life. In one court room, for example, the judge instructed Gandhi to remove his turban. Gandhi refused, left the building under protest, and reported the incident to a newspaper, emphasizing his right to wear traditional dress (Gandhi 1983: 67). As he wrote in his autobiography, the incident became »an unexpected advertisement« for him just a few days after his arrival (69).

For Gandhi, it was a characteristic and natural reflex in any conflict to immediately look for a communicative level that not only included discussion with the opposing side, but often also meant publishing and explaining one's own standpoint. This is one reason why Gandhi became a public figure in such a short period of time.

This need became even greater a little while later, when Gandhi was dragged off a train and forced to spend a night in a station. He had asserted his right to travel in First Class, as his ticket allowed, rather than in the luggage van – the usual place for Indians in South Africa at the time. This experience of discrimination was new and shocking to Gandhi. He wrestled with the issue and almost returned to India, before deciding that it would be cowardly to go home without resolving it (Gandhi 1983: 70). From this moment on, Gandhi did everything he could to improve the living conditions of the Indian minority in South Africa. He shook off »his shy self literally overnight and dedicated himself unreservedly to his political and religious destiny as a leader« (Erikson 1978: 50). This was thus the time during which his philosophical and political orientation developed – a declaration of war on oppression and exploitation, be it in the form of racism, colonialism, caste rule, capitalism, sexism, or discrimination of religious groups. He began to call meetings, gather information about injustices, hold talks with politicians, and organize protests against unjust laws (Gandhi 1983: 83–86). Alongside all these efforts, he continued to look for channels through which he could highlight the problems of his compatriots to a wider audience, as well as opportunities to reach, inform and educate the South African Indians themselves.

In 1896, he published the *Green Pamphlet*, a brochure on the situation in Africa. It created quite a stir in his home country – Gandhi’s essay was discussed by almost every Indian newspaper and printed a total of 5,000 times in two editions (Gandhi 1983: 95). The public resonance opened doors for Gandhi, who began to work together intensively with various European and Indian newspapers. It did not take long for newspaper publishers to regard him as the official representative of the Indian minority in South Africa. He now had increasing opportunities to present his view of the situation to an ever-larger audience (Driessen 2002: 124ff.).

This development process also made it clear to Gandhi that occasional pieces in newspapers, and the reliance on the goodwill of the editors it entailed, would not be sufficient to achieve his goals: He needed an independent mouthpiece. In 1903, he set up *Indian Opinion*, a weekly newspaper with an average circulation of 2,000. Gandhi was not only the publisher – he also wrote the majority of the articles himself and initially funded *Indian Opinion* with the help of proceeds from his flourishing legal firm (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003).

The 16 simply designed pages of *Indian Opinion*, printed weekly on an ancient press, became one of the most important weapons in Gandhi’s fight against discrimination (Driessen 2002: 128). The first columns and articles took a very moderate tone, with the publisher declaring that »we have unflinching faith in British justice« (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003). However, Gandhi soon recognized the futility of political petitioning and began active resistance – with the tone of his articles changing to match (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003). He informed his readers about his campaigns and gave advice on conflicts with authorities. Gandhi also saw *Indian Opinion* as a medium of understanding – he used the newspaper to communicate with Indians in South Africa, publishing and responding to reader letters. Looking back, he wrote in his autobiography:

»Satyagraha would probably have been impossible without this weekly. For me, it became a real treasure trove of insights into human nature in all its nuances. [...] It was as though the entire community was thinking aloud in this communication with me. It made me very conscious of the responsibility of a journalist, and the influence it gave me over the community made the future struggle truly possible, while also giving it its proper dignity and irresistible strength.« (Gandhi 1983: 115-116)

The fact that the neologism *Satyagraha* <sup>[2]</sup> itself was found through a call for proposals in *Indian Opinion* is a further indication of how central the paper was to Gandhi’s efforts in South Africa (Gandhi 1983: 133). The Indian press researcher

2 Composition of the Gujarati words *sat* and *agraha*, truth and strength

S.N. Bhattacharyya writes: »South Africa not only shaped many of the ideas and traits of Gandhiji, but made an out-and-out journalist of him as well.« (Bhattacharyya 1965: 2).

Gandhi returned to India in 1914. There, he found the central challenge of his life: the struggle for Indian independence. This aim, too, would be impossible to achieve without appropriate journalistic platforms, as his experience in South Africa had shown. He decided to take over the English-language weekly *Young India*, as well as *Navajivan*, which was published in Gujarati (Driessen 2002: 131).

In 1933, he also launched *Harijan*, a weekly newspaper whose sole aim was to improve the living situation of a section of society that had been marginalized up to then: the ›untouchables.‹ Gandhi referred to members of this caste as ›Harijans,‹ people of God, and dedicated the newspaper to them. In Gandhi's view, helping the untouchables and ultimately abolishing the caste system altogether was essential to India's internal peace (Bhattacharyya 1965: 55).

Gandhi remained both politically active and a media figure right up until his death. Skillfully staged large-scale events such as the Salt March in 1930 (cf. Driessen 2002) helped him to bring his message to a global audience.

There is no question that the mechanisms of the media were an essential part of the Satyagraha strategy. However, Gandhi was only able to achieve this integration by adhering strictly to principles for dealing with the media and, above all, by practicing as a journalist himself.

»Publicity is our best and perhaps the only  
weapon of defense«  
(Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 3)

## 2.1 The nation's teacher: Introduction

Gandhi's main aim with his newspapers was to address the broad population directly, in order to win them over to his struggle. He therefore used journalism primarily in order to prepare and enable satyagraha. Galtung (1987: 47-50) compares Gandhi to the Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong in this context – both resistance fighters believed that social change needed to begin with simple people; the struggle was to improve their living conditions. The main proponents of social change should be not the intellectual elites, but primarily the farmers who formed the majority of society. They had to be the first to be convinced of the struggle and taught its techniques. But achieving this goal required two conditions to be met. Firstly, Indian society needed to be united and inner peace created. Gandhi believed that this relied entirely on general reform of Indian society

and particularly on improving the position of the ›untouchables.‹ As we will see, Gandhi attempted to initiate this reform through journalistic means, especially through advice and education.

The second pre-condition for mobilizing his compatriots for the non-violent struggle was the ethical and moral education of his readers in line with his own ideas. In the Satyagraha campaigns, the Satyagrahi, Gandhi set the very highest standards for his fellow fighters, writing:

»The author of the Sanskrit saying ›forgiveness is the ornament of the brave‹ drew on his rich experience of satyagrahi, which never gives anyone the slightest reason to criticize it. Satyagraha means dismissing all weakness and also dismissing distrust; after all, what help is mistrust to those who want not to destroy their opponents, but to win them over to their side.«  
(Gandhi 1983: 176)

Gandhi saw Satyagraha as a weapon of the truthful and, as such, he could only apply it if the people behaved accordingly; if they had the moral strength to maintain the principle of non-violence in spirit, word and deed (Gandhi 1983: 237). Teaching the readers was thus the central motive of Gandhi's journalistic work.

In fact, educational intentions in journalism were nothing unusual at the time. Rapid progress in education and research had raised the intellectual level of the population, and many English papers, especially during the Victorian period (1837-1901), began to communicate political and moral values (Bhattacharyya 1965: 92-93).

This was the historical background against which Gandhi began his journalistic career, which quickly gave him the position of »national communicator and educator through the press« (Brown 1989: 135). Historian Judith Brown argues that Gandhi took on an educational role with his newspapers, continuously enlightening his readers on social problems, giving them examples of altruism and patriotism, informing them about rights, and showing them how they could get involved in the Indians' problems (Brown 1989: 50).

From the 1930s, if not earlier, Gandhi's authoritarian relationship with his readers was aided by his reputation as a sacred person – a ›mahatma‹ or ›great soul,‹ who had dedicated his life to the Indian nation and its poorest inhabitants (Brown 1989: 311). Gandhi's mission benefited from the emotional necessity of searching for a second father, which had been embedded in the Hindu religion for millennia. Particularly during *antevasin* – the teaching years during the life of a Hindu – the authority of the parents is passed on to a recognized guru (Erikson 1978: 37). Gandhi exploited this traditional, religious institution – Galtung writes that he practiced an »enlightened gurucracy« (Galtung 1987: 40).

Unlike in the Western world, in many Eastern traditions, gods take the form of images, leaving more space for god-like people, gurus, or mahatmas. For Western observers, it is important to understand that this intermediate world made it possible for Gandhi to receive more than admiration and respect, without his points of view becoming ideologized or regarded as absolute (Galtung 1987: 41). It appears characteristic of both Indian culture in general and Gandhi in particular that, despite his predestined position, he never dictated opinions to his followers. He did not patronize them, instead constantly calling on his readers to form their own opinions:

»The newspapers should be read for the study of facts. They should not be allowed to kill the habit of independent thinking.« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001)

The influence that Gandhi exercised through his journalistic work should therefore not be seen as manipulation in a pejorative sense. In his view, journalists could only successfully fulfil their educational role by serving the reader with helpful and useful information. He wrote, »The sole aim of journalism should be service« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001). Gandhi believed that this principle of service gave rise to various practical consequences, which are examined in the sections below. It will become clear that all Gandhi's journalistic principles can be traced back to the standard he set himself: to optimize the use value of newspapers for the reader and, at the same time, to protect editorial work against influences that contradict this choice of priorities. Gandhi thus saw journalism as a means of power in two senses. On the one hand, he used journalism as a way to bring about positive change. On the other, he saw it as important to empower himself first of all, in order to make journalism usable for his purposes.

Gandhi saw himself repeatedly faced with the challenge of reconciling his journalistic actions, his *dharma*<sup>[3]</sup> and his ethics. Creating this congruence was a religious necessity for him – the means and the ends had to be inseparably coessential in everything he did (Erikson 1978: 477).

3 In Hinduism, *dharma* refers to one's life's work, which is determined in equal measure by one's previous life, by what one learns, and by choice. It integrates individual experience, yet is still essentially related to the entire community. It is namely the consolidation of the world through the personal fulfillment of each individual within a shared, cemented order

## 2.2 Help for self-education: Gandhi's principles of use value journalism

Gandhi wanted to use the high use value of his articles to motivate his readers to learn. His idea of journalism can therefore be effectively described by the term »use value journalism.«

By definition, use value journalism differs from other journalistic forms in »its dominant intention to communicate, which supports the recipients in an intended action« (Eickelkamp 2004: 16). In Gandhi's case, this objective was initially very general, namely to improve the living situation of his countrymen, and especially rural Indians. To do this, he had to ask himself what the reader was doing, how, and with what aim. Products of use value journalism are intended to make a positive change to the life of the reader, who should gain an individual benefit from it; the choice of topics is based on action, implementation, and results (Eickelkamp 2004: 16).

Gandhi's most influential publication also consistently followed the idea of use value – the weekly newspaper *Harijan* contained no reports on political events, for example. Gandhi decided that, »It will rigorously eschew all politics« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 56). The paper did not report on the India Act<sup>[4]</sup> of 1935, nor on Gandhi's withdrawal from politics. Instead, *Harijan* contained helpful tips on reorganizing villages, proposals for redeveloping the cotton industry, warnings about poisonous snakes, and instructions for making paper out of rags and fertilizer out of excrement, to name but a few subjects (Bhattacharyya 1965: 56). The weekly paper also set great store by dispensing dietary advice – »laughingly he called himself a food missionary« (Brown 1989: 301).

Gandhi said that *Harijan* was not published for the brief amusement or enjoyment of the reader (Bhattacharyya 1965: 75). For him, practical advice was of such great importance that no space remained in his newspapers for entertainment such as articles about films, art exhibitions or sporting events. Gandhi even saw factual information that did not have a specific use as superfluous (Driessen 2002: 136). He stated:

»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.« (quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 160)

In order to answer the fundamental question of use value journalism – *What is*

4 In 1935, the Government of India Act initiated parliamentary elections in the provinces. The Indian National Congress won seven of the eleven provinces in 1937.

*the reader doing, how, and with what aim?* – it was essential to find a way to share in the lives of farm workers and to learn of their concerns and problems. Gandhi needed to know what was happening in the villages in order to develop a benchmark on which to base his search for and selection of issues. He needed to find ways to gain information in a country as large as the Indian sub-continent, without paved roads or a working telephone network. Although news agencies did exist, most only covered the cities and were manipulated by the government (Driessen 2002: 138). Furthermore, he wanted to find out what concerned his readers first hand. Wearing the clothes of a farm worker, he visited their fields, sat down with them, and spoke to them in their language (Bhattacharyya 1965: 158). This discussion, this type of research, was more than just a way to gain information – it allowed him to get to know his readers and share in their problems and fears.

In order to reach more people across the entire country, Gandhi also built up a huge network of volunteer correspondents over the years. Satyagrahi or sympathizers of his movement reported to him on what was happening in their regions, making their own contribution to the struggle for independence. Spending a great deal of time reading letters from readers is essential for use value journalists, as it is the »initiation into the mental world of the readers« (Fasel 2004: 75). Gandhi read every letter his supporters sent him. S.N. Bhattacharyya writes that he was the best-informed publisher in India: »That is how he could feel the pulse of the nation through a fleet of self-styled correspondents« (Bhattacharyya 1965: 84).

### 2.3 The elephant in the room: Gandhi's principles of journalistic truthfulness

In Gandhi's view, every journalist must strive to reflect the truth in his articles. If journalists deliberately distorted the truth, however, be it through a lack of care or of diligence, the positive and constructive functions of journalism could reverse into a devastatingly destructive force. Gandhi wrote:

»The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001)

Gandhi saw being aware of and mastering this ambivalence as the greatest responsibility of any journalist – a conviction that grew not only out of his work as a publisher and deskman, but also from his experience of reporting about himself. In the *Disturbances in Durban* chapter of his autobiography *The Story of*

*My Experiments with Truth* (Gandhi 1983: 95-106), Gandhi reports on how he only just managed to escape an angry mob of European plantation owners in South Africa. Their aggression had been fueled by Reuters reports that gave a completely distorted representation of some of his speeches (Gandhi 1983: 96). Gandhi had indeed criticized the working conditions of his countrymen in South Africa during a trip to India, but the journalists had reported on this in an abbreviated, exaggerated form. Gandhi wrote:

»This kind of thing is not unusual, and the exaggeration is not always intentional. Very busy people who are used to looking at everything through their own lens skim-read something and then turn out an excerpt that may be merely a product of their own imagination.« (Gandhi 1983: 95)

Although Gandhi shows understanding towards the writers of the unfortunate reports in this quote, he would never have shown such lenience to the employees of his newspapers or even to himself in his role as a journalist. Unconditional commitment to the truth was not just one of the cornerstones of journalism for Gandhi (cf. Gupta 2001) – his understanding of truth was central to his philosophy. He used the words ›truth‹, ›god‹, and ›love‹ largely synonymously, since they meant the same thing to him – the source of *ahimsa* (Galtung 1987: 17). He wanted this to gain practical meaning through the satyagraha struggle and, as a result, it also needed to become the prime principle of journalism, which was to make the struggle possible. Only if this was fulfilled would Gandhi's journalistic activities be compatible with his ethical principle of the inseparability of means and ends.

Given that absolute truth is unachievable, journalistic truth is taken below to mean the intention of approximation. We will now show how Gandhi attempted to achieve this truth; how he tried to live up to his prime principle of truthfulness in his journalistic activities.

Psychohistorian Erik H. Erikson (1978) talks of Gandhi's attempt »to introduce an almost Christian, but certainly Socratic, ›yes, yes‹ and ›no, no‹« to Indian life, in which, unlike in the Western understanding, truth has various meanings (Erikson 1978: 43). Stemming from this standard, he argues that Gandhi always focused on the factuality of the content. He consistently put this principle into practice in his journalistic work in particular. For Gandhi, the duty of care and the obligation to correct, just as they are interpreted today in the Press Code of the German Press Council (Deutscher Presserat 2019), were an inner necessity and self-evident fundamental conditions of constructive journalism:

Gandhi rigorously rejected the publication of information that had not yet been carefully checked for truthfulness. In his view, the press had an obligation to hold back publication until information had been confirmed unambiguous-

ly (Bhattacharyya 1965: 84). Even then, Gandhi was conscious of the tension between topicality and careful research, time pressures and the flood of information. He knew that daily newspapers find it harder to report truthfully than weekly publications – another reason why all his newspapers were issued on a weekly basis. However, he also believed that the pressures of time and competition in daily journalism were no excuse for a lack of care (Bhattacharyya 1965: 73).

Of course, neither his staff nor Gandhi himself were infallible. One of his principles was therefore to publish corrections immediately if his writing contained untruths. Gandhi rarely viewed his writing as purely transient daily journalism. Instead, he emphasized that it was often of such lasting value that correcting serious errors was all the more necessary (Bhattacharyya 1965: 75).

However, the principles mentioned are not sufficient as a framework for truth in journalism. A duty of care and a willingness to correct oneself are merely necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for journalistic truth. In Gandhi's view, journalism could only succeed with truthfulness, i.e. with a love of and unconditional commitment to truth.

Viewing the principle of truthfulness in a journalistic context merely as an obligation to truthful reporting would be insufficient and misleading, however, as this interpretation communicates the idea that a person can be obligated to be truthful and that truthfulness is primarily a question of discipline. Yet truthfulness cannot be ordered; it must come from an intrinsic motivation and is thus primarily a question of personal attitude and professional ethos. Gandhi thus believed that control exerted from outside was »more ruinous than a lack of control. It can only be beneficial if it is practiced from the inside« (Gandhi 1983: 116).

Like negligent research, a lack of truthfulness can also lead to incorrect representations that Gandhi could not accept. A resident of one of his ashrams<sup>[5]</sup> remembers an incident that demonstrates this:

»Charlie<sup>[6]</sup> and I had left Babu lying on the verandah, and Charlie was telling me about an article he had just written for the Manchester Guardian about the Satyagraha movement then in progress in Travancore. In glowing terms he had described how all eyes were now concentrated on this wonderful movement and no one was interested any longer in the proposed Government reforms. ›I will just go and show it to Babu<sup>[7]</sup>,‹ said Charlie, › before I send it off!‹ Presently he returned, thoroughly crest-fallen. What did Babu think of it? I asked. ›Oh,‹ said Charlie, Babu said: ›Charlie, it is what you

5 In many Indian languages, an *ashram* denotes a place of contemplation. The literal meaning of the term is a »place of exertion. Gandhi's ashrams were above all communities whose members had chosen a particular way of life.

6 Charles Freer Andrews, a close and long-standing employee of Gandhi.

7 Gandhi was affectionately known as *Babu* to his family and friends.

would like to be true: but it isn't true.« With all Bapu's idealism went a strong strain of realism, which Charlie Andrews sometimes lacked.« (Bhattacharyya 1965: 74)

The English journalist Martin Kingsley wrote that it testifies to a »deep ignorance of any journalistic art« (Kingsley 1948: 102) to believe that it is possible to assess the truthfulness of an article merely based on the precision of its presentation. He argued that it is well known that any practiced journalist can write an article that does not contain a single untrue fact, and yet »as a whole is a singular lie from A to Z« (Kingsley 1948: 102).

Gandhi would have been well aware of this problem. To demonstrate it, in an interview he referred to the poem *The blind men and the elephant* (Bhattacharyya 1965: 160). In this parable, six blind men attempt to »see an elephant, and come to completely different conclusions. The first compares the animal to a wall, the second to a spear etc. It shows that observations may be true in themselves but, in claiming to be the absolute truth, can become untrue. The blind men needed someone who could see to classify and weigh up their findings, in order to gain a correct overview. In Gandhi's view, this is a metaphor for the role of a conscientious journalist.

In this context, he wrote a letter to his son in which he described the principle of journalistic diligence and thus the fundamental condition for journalistic truth:

»What is truth in journalism? How does it differ from accuracy? Are they the same thing? Truth is not only a question of knowledge. It means more. It means the balancing of judgment in a most disinterested manner.« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 73)

Here, Gandhi describes the establishment of truth as a creative process, as an objectification of partial truths, i.e. multiple perspectives, on the part of the journalist to form a legitimate, journalistic truth. This process corresponds to Gandhi's general idea of the establishment of truth as, in line with his ethics, it leads to an intensive fusion with one's inner self (Erikson 1978: 43).

The journalist Rudolf Walter Leonhardt (1976) writes that compiling facts to form a whole is the part of the establishment of truth in which the journalist is no longer merely a craftsman – instead, he has to work as an artist to compose the facts. According to Leonhardt, the second step in the working process – ordering the piece into a cohesive picture – is a spontaneous process and cannot be achieved with fixed, formulated rules. »The crystallization point around which the details coalesce can be an idea, even a coincidence, a conviction, even a prejudice« (Leonhardt 1976: 9).

At this critical moment of his work, a journalist thus has to integrate part of his subjectivity into the journalistic product, necessarily adding his own perspective. This clearly demonstrates the necessity of journalistic diligence – in order to do justice to the truth, in Gandhi's view the journalist must disregard his prejudices and limit his composition of the cohesive image to the verified facts. The journalist must resist the temptation to influence or alter the facts, to add, omit, excessively emphasize or disproportionately play down circumstances in order to achieve an interesting and rounded overall picture. It is only when the truthfulness, the will to deliver truth, outweighs other interests that the facts can be scrupulously assessed.

As Gandhi once said to a journalist from an influential British newspaper, »We are today suffering from a double evil – the suppression of the facts and concoction« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 171).

At the time, he criticized journalism for having become the art of »intelligent anticipation of events« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 160). Premature interpretation of uncertain facts and wild speculation were, for Gandhi, »journalistic kite-flying« (Bhattacharyya 1965: 171). In his view, the journalist should be aware of the gap between his own knowledge and the necessity of using it journalistically. As most journalistic »facts« are often merely changeable assessments, he argued, in certain events, the journalist best met his professional responsibility by saying nothing (Bhattacharyya 1965: 171), rather than by generating unnecessary fear, for example. He gave the following criticism:

»The newspaperman has become a walking plague. Newspapers are fast becoming the people's Bible, Koran and Gita rolled in one. A newspaper predicts that riots are coming and all the sticks and knives in Delhi have been sold out. A journalist's duty is to teach people to be brave, not to instill fear into them.« (Gandhi, quoted in Bandyopadhyay 1964: n.p.)

## 2.4 Comprehensible and objective: Gandhi's linguistic principles

Starting from the standards described above, Gandhi spent his journalistic career cultivating a linguistic style that matched his ethical principles. This section describes the key characteristics of this artisanal means, beginning with the principles of usefulness and truthfulness.

In line with the linguistic requirements of a text in use value journalism – clarity, objectivity and succinctness (Herzog 2004: 248-249) – Gandhi's ultimate objective was »to express [himself] in a way that the general public in the Indian population could understand« (Driessen 2002: 133). Gandhi's linguistic intention was never aesthetic, but always pragmatic. His American publisher John Hay-

nes Holmes writes that Gandhi expressed himself with disciplined simplicity, inspired solely by the desire to make himself understood (Bhattacharyya 1965: 97). As the following advice to an employee shows, Gandhi did not only demand clear and direct language from himself: »When you want to say a thing, don't beat about the bush, don't indulge in euphemisms and pin-pricks, but tell it in a straight-forward way« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 77).

In addition, not least thanks to the intensive exchange with his readers already described, Gandhi succeeded in communicating in a language that was not foreign to them. This enabled him not only to make his texts easier to understand, but also to create a basis of trust, thus reinforcing the influence of his messages. Krishnaswami Swaminathan, publisher of Gandhi's collected works and professor of English literature, noted that Gandhi's style was

»[...] a natural expression of his democratic temper. There is no conscious ornamentation, no obtrusive trick of style calling attention to itself. The style is a blend of the modern manner of an individual sharing his ideas and experiences with his readers, and the impersonal manner of the Indian tradition in which the thought is more important than the person expounding it. The sense of equality with the common man is the mark of Gandhi's style and the burden of his teaching.« (Swaminathan, quoted in Guha 2003)

In Gandhi's view, a journalist's conscientiousness should be demonstrated in neutral language in which the writer takes a back seat, behind the thoughts of the text. For him, the writing process thus always meant a contemplative exercise in self-discipline – essentially a journey of self-discovery and reflection on one's own subjectivity. The following quote bears witness to this process:

»The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics on my vocabulary. It is a training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a line exercise to remove these weeds. The reader sees the page of *Young India* fairly well dressed up and sometimes, with Romain Rolland<sup>8</sup>, he is inclined to say »what a fine old man he must be, Well, let the world understand that the fineness is carefully and prayerfully cultivated.« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 80)

Gandhi said that it was above all his natural shyness that taught him to use words sparingly; a thoughtless word therefore only rarely escaped his lips or his

8 The French Nobel laureate published the book *Mahatma Gandhi* in 1925..

pen (Bhattacharyya 1965: 83). During his time in London, the moderate, precise and objective tone of the *Times* became his linguistic role model. In his view, the high-quality British newspaper was the polar opposite of the ›cheaper‹ press, with its less precise language rich in imagery (Bhattacharyya 1965: 71). A sensational, affecting tone in the style of the tabloids would have been incompatible with his standards – he said, he could not write »merely to excite passion« (Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 80).

Gandhi did not accept rudeness in his newspapers under any circumstances, adhering to the principle of non-violence even in his words. Although he was known for his fine sense of humor, considering harmless mockery legitimate in a difference of opinion, he would never have allowed an argument to cross the line into vulgarity (Bhattacharyya 1965: 72).

## 2.5 A duty to the reader: Gandhi's principles of journalistic independence

The idea that journalism has to be a service means that journalists must display unconditional loyalty towards their readers. Only if a journalist yearns to exclusively serve the reader through his work will he develop the will to follow the principles this demands. These principles were described in the sections above. In Gandhi's view, any other, primarily egoistic motivations for journalistic work had to have disastrous consequences. He wrote:

»It is often observed that newspapers published any matter that they have, just to fill in space. The reason is that most newspapers have their eyes on profits. ... There are newspapers in the west which are so full of trash that it will be a sin even to touch them. At times, they produce bitterness and strife even between different families and communities.« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001)

Only loyalty to the reader can be the driving force behind truthful journalism with use value. In order to protect the journalists on his newspaper against influences that could have stopped this being the top priority, Gandhi constantly tried to shield editorial work from political and especially economic interests. To prevent himself becoming the object of commercial interests, Gandhi therefore decided early on not to publish any advertising in his newspapers. If a product benefits society, he argued, the manufacturer should not have to spend money in order for newspapers to promote it. In his newspapers, Gandhi wrote free of charge and by his own conviction about products that he believed were useful and would improve the lives of poor people. He praised useful oil presses, promoted

a more efficient weaving loom, and wrote articles extolling the virtues of a mortar that husked red rice without destroying the vitamin content (Bhattacharyya 1965: 118-119). If a product was poor or could potentially harm the purchaser, on the other hand, Gandhi saw it as a journalistic sin to tempt the reader into buying it. He also viewed the advertising business as a critical moment in which the power of journalism could become destructive. He wrote:

»It is now an established practice with newspapers to depend for revenues mainly on advertisements rather than on subscriptions. The result has been deplorable. The very newspaper which writes against the drink-evil publishes advertisements in praise of drinks. In the same issue, we read of the harmful effects of tobacco as also from where to buy it. [...] No matter at what cost or effort we must put an end to this undesirable practice or at least reform. It is the duty of every newspaper to exercise some restraint in the matter of advertisements.« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001)

Gandhi planned to compensate for the financial disadvantage that came with omitting advertising by increasing the number of subscribers. He intended *Indian Opinion* to be merely an instrument of service and pursued no financial interests with it. As such, he believed it was only logical that the newspaper's survival depended directly on the number of people who valued it sufficiently to support it financially (Bhattacharyya 1965: 117).

A watershed moment for *Indian Opinion*, which also underscored Gandhi's efforts to achieve economic independence, was the foundation of his first ashram, Phoenix Farm. As the fate of the newspaper was always closely intertwined with Gandhi himself, this key moment in his life also meant big changes for *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi had decided to organize his life in line with the principles of John Ruskin<sup>9</sup> and from then on to become self-sufficient by working the fields. In line with this quest for independence, the *Indian Opinion* printshop was moved onto the farm premises — the newspaper could now be produced self-sufficiently by ashram residents and was no longer dependent on external printers (Gandhi 1983: 124).

Gandhi refused to pursue commercial goals through journalistic activity. As the quote below shows, he saw this stance, which in turn placed the idea of service ahead of other motivations, as another essential condition for journalism with a positive effect:

»In my humble opinion, it is wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. There are certain spheres of work which are of such conse-

9 Gandhi was greatly influenced by Ruskin's work *Unto this Last*, in which the English author extolls the virtues of a »simple« life.

quence and have such bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one's livelihood will defeat the primary aim behind them. When, further a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices.« (Gandhi, quoted in Gupta 2001)

However, Gandhi did not only resist economic dependency; he also fought against the influence of the state. In his view, the press should be able to pursue its role and obligations freely and without fear, and not allow itself to be intimidated by governments. He called on journalists to stand by and watch their editorial offices being closed, rather than to cooperate with the authorities (Driesen 2002: 147).

»Keep your standards right. Everything else will follow.«  
(Gandhi, quoted in Bhattacharyya 1965: 73)

### 3. Conclusion

Gandhi called himself a humble seeker of truth, impatient to realize his true self. His service could thus be seen as pure self-interest, he continued, as his service to the population is nothing more than part of the education he subjected himself to in order to release his soul (Gandhi 1983: 260).

As a result of his natural need to communicate, Gandhi sought out public attention early on in both internal and external conflicts. As a logical consequence, he quickly identified journalism as a suitable medium for this struggle. He used primarily his own weekly newspaper as an educational tool, to improve the living situation of the broad population and thus to win them over to his cause.

Gandhi's principles are not those of a journalist who idealizes practice at a hypothetical level, nor those of a theoretician who could be accused of implausible utopianism. Instead, they are testament to his practical approach. Gandhi's journalistic activities are solely based on his recognition of them as a suitable medium for his struggle. His search for publicity was a necessary consequence of his search for truth and justice. As such, this is the central message of his journalistic work: A journalist will only be able to have a positive effect on this world if he sees his work primarily as a means to an ideal end. Those who see journalism as a purpose in itself, who are not guided by a higher goal, will not have the strength to empower themselves to have a positive effect through journalism.

Even today, 150 years after his birth<sup>10</sup>, Gandhi's principles still give us cause

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869.

for reflection. A reader focus, care, conscientiousness, comprehensibility, independence – Gandhi preached virtues that are still considered features of high-quality journalism to this day. His publications' unconditional proximity to the reader, in both form and content, and the strict avoidance unnecessary affectation appear almost prophetic in the face of the increasing fragmentation and sense of outrage in today's society. Other aspects of his views seem strange: From today's perspective, journalism's legitimation comes primarily from its function in the system of society – informing the demos and helping them to form opinions, so that they can make political decisions (Kiefer 2010: 211). Gandhi's use value journalism appears almost apolitical compared to this, but it is important to evaluate it in its cultural and historical context. Gandhi's journalistic work in a rural society is more effectively compared with the standards of modern media development work, which focuses primarily on more existential issues than disseminating the latest political news.

The same goes for Gandhi's view that journalism as a profession and thus the existential dependence of journalistic activities are not compatible with the necessary independence from external influences. Of course, the modern media system is unthinkable without professional journalists, and indeed it was only the institutionalization of the profession – including training, organization, rights etc. – that made the professionalization of journalism possible in the first place. In turn, this institutionalization required a level of sophistication and development in society that simply did not exist in India in the early 20th Century. Here, too, Gandhi's views must be seen in the specific cultural and historical context in which they were formed. That makes it all the more astounding that his ethical principles – formulated under the conditions of a different world – can claim to apply even in today's complex media system. Gandhi's ethics are a plea for closeness to the audience. More than that: for loyalty to the audience rather than to the (advertising) customer; for sober, truthful reporting that attempts to elevate the readers and support them in their development instead of serving base instincts; for journalistic humility and keeping quiet when there is nothing to say; for a language that carries the spirit of non-violence; and, not least, for diversity and the conviction that even the weakest must be listened to if society is to work. What could be more contemporary than that?

## About the author

**Dr. Gerret von Nordheim** (\*1985) researches and teaches at the University of Hamburg and the TU Dortmund. His main research fields are digital journalism, intermedia effects in digital public spheres and computer-aided methods in content analysis. He studied journalism and social sciences. contact: gerret.vonnordheim@uni-hamburg.de

## References

- Bandyopadhyay, Anu (1964): *BAHUROOPE GANDHI*. Bombay, G. R. Bhatkal, Popular Prakashan. URL: [https://archive.org/stream/LearningFromGandhi-BahuroopGandhi/bg\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/LearningFromGandhi-BahuroopGandhi/bg_djvu.txt) (31.10. 2019)
- Bhattacharyya, Sailendra Nath (1965): *Mahatma Gandhi. The Journalist*. London, Asia Pub. House. URL: [https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.220102/2015.220102.Mahatma-Gandhi\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.220102/2015.220102.Mahatma-Gandhi_djvu.txt) (31.10. 2019)
- Brown, Judith M. (1989): *Gandhi. Prisoner of Hope*. New Haven/London, Yale University Press
- Deutscher Presserat (2019): *Pressekodex – Ethische Standards für den Journalismus*. <https://www.presserat.de/pressekodex.html> (31.10.2019)
- Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Uma (2003): *History of the ›Indian Opinion‹ newspaper*. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-indian-opinion-newspaper> (31.10.2019)
- Driessen, Barbara (2002): »Mahatma« *Gandhi als Journalist. Mit der Waffe der Publizität; der »Salzmarsch« von 1930 als moderne Medieninszenierung*. London/Frankfurt/M., Holger Ehling Publishing
- Eickelkamp, Andreas (2004): Was ist Nutzwertjournalismus? Nutzwertjournalismus: Eine Definition. In: Fasel, Christoph (Ed.): *Nutzwertjournalismus*. Konstanz, UVK, pp. 14-21
- Erikson, Erik H. (1978): *Gandhis Wahrheit. Über die Ursprünge der militanten Gewaltlosigkeit*. Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp
- Fasel, Christoph (2004): Wer ist eigentlich mein Leser, Hörer, Zuschauer? In: Fasel, Christoph (Ed.): *Nutzwertjournalismus*. Konstanz, UVK, pp. 73-78
- Galtung, Johan (1987): *Der Weg ist das Ziel. Gandhi und die Alternativbewegung*. Wuppertal/Lünen, Peter Hammer Verlag
- Gandhi, Mahatma (1983): *Mein Leben*. Leipzig, Suhrkamp
- Guha, Ramachandra (2003): *GANDHI THE JOURNALIST, The hindu*. <http://ramachandraguha.in/archives/gandhi-the-journalist-the-hindu.html> (31.10.2019)
- Gupta, V.S.: *Mahatma Gandhi And Mass Media*. [http://www.mkgandhi.org/mass\\_media.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/mass_media.htm) (31.10.2019)

- Herzog, Willi (2004): Fazit: Der Sachtext zwingt zur Sachlichkeit. In: Fasel, Christoph (Ed.): *Nutzwertjournalismus*. Konstanz, UVK, pp. 248-250
- Kingsley, Martin: *Die Presse, die das Publikum wünscht und liebt*. Recklinghausen, Verlag Bitter & Co
- Kiefer, Marie Luise (2010). *Journalismus und Medien als Institutionen*. Konstanz, UVK
- Leonhardt, Rudolf Walter (1976): *Journalismus und Wahrheit*. München/Zürich, Piper
- Tamendehrou, Amanollah (2014): *Freedom of Press in a Democratic Society. The Case of India*. Dissertation, Aligarh Muslim University, <http://ir.amu.ac.in/10196/> (31.10.2019)