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**Media ethics in professional journalism:**

**Moral virtues of professional journalism**

***Conceptual uncertainty***

Conceptual uncertainty makes for interesting dialogue, much of it overly tedious and seemingly unending, but its exposition and analysis provide healthy catalytic stimulation for professional journalists.

The world of communicator is overflowing with uncertainty. Basic terms go undefined and more complex concepts continue to spawn debate and even ideological chaos. For some, the message is the match that ignites the flames of progressive social discourse and, in many cases, of communal discord. According to others (like [Marshall McLuhan, 1965](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pcoC2l7ToI)), the media themselves impact our lives, causing us to think and act differently than we would without them.

To explain “bias” within this topic is that the media largely refuse to admit any bias at all. It is this, more than the bias, that infuriates the astute audience member. Media are full of biases. Media managers and staffers throughout the hierarchy have their values. This is natural, and it is strange that media people would deny their biases.

For example, behind western journalism is the philosophical notion that no one perspective or view of reality has ultimate dominance. At the end of the so-called postmodern (pro-futuristic?) age, one wonders if monism of basic meaning will return to the world of communication. But perhaps such a situation has never existed, with the world always being multi-perspective.

[Jacques Derrida](https://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/), a French philosopher who has been a leader in inter-subjective postmodernism, has argued that interpretation is part of reality.

Increasingly, however, journalists are beginning to recognize the impossibility (and the weakness) of so-called objectivity. Now it is generally believed that when a person buys a newspaper, he/she buys a point of view. Or perhaps better, when a person listens to, or reads, a reporter’s story, what is received is a point of view.

***Views on the news and Mythology***

Basic public communication concepts such as news, objectivity, truth, journalism, reporter, magazine, newspaper, social media, bias, propaganda, mass, public opinion, profession, media (all kind) and media ethics-these and many others wait meaningful definitions.

One of the most troublesome of the concepts is “the news”. The very concept of the news is problematic. Journalists generally claims they know the news when they see it. And, of course, historically, news has been considered, despite semantic difficulties, the core substance of journalism. But, from a realistic perspective, news today has lost its primary status. It has evolved into infotainment, into personality profiles, and into soft and slushy stories, somewhere between news features and entertainment, between polemic and propaganda.

Objective is one of the most misunderstood terms in journalism, Many (like most postmodernists of today) call it naïve empiricism; others refer to it as an unachievable ideal; others maintain that it should not be used at all. A report may be truthful but not objective. It is always incomplete, although its facts may be accurate. For one thing, the subjectivity of the persons involved in the story (the reporter and the one being reported on)is part of the “objective” reality of the story-and not reporter, even with the help of a psychiatrist, can ever come close to doing justice to that.

What is the basic nature of journalistic news? In theory, at least in traditional idealistic press theory, news reports should be (1) information needed by an audience, (2) reporting that avoids harm to the society, and (3) factual, accurate, balanced, relevant and complete.

But, nine-tenths of the news today is not needed by its audience…. News is not objectivity. *News is selection from objectivity*. It is a story that is strained through the perception of the reporter, mingling biases and judgments of the reporter with the cold facts of the event.

We have also to talk about mythology. There is an also a Myth of Professionalism. Many journalists consider them professionals and journalism as a profession.

Let’s try to clarify this. Being a “professional journalist” for example, to many, simply implies being a hard-working, efficient, quality journalist-doing well the task assumed. I would agree with those who say that journalist is one who works for an institutionalized medium in capacity relating to the getting, writing, editing and commenting of the news. Ok, that is related to the word “journalist”, but what about the word “professional”. That is, I assume somebody who is conducting his work professionally. However, from a sociological perspective, a profession is not simply a business or a “special” calling. Nor does separates the good practitioner from the mediocre or bad. I know a lot of professional journalist that are both of mentioned, and they still call themselves professional journalists. A true profession is an institutionalized collection of public service workers who, although individualists, set aside many personal preferences in order to have a collective spirit and set of self-determined standards to guide their group or profession. When we are talking about journalists who claims themselves professionals, ethically is not good and correct to be something who you are not, especially if you are just a member of Journalistic association. For me personally, to be really professional journalist, in terms of respecting ethics within its core, first you have to ethical person and, above all, your professionalism is not within the point of “how much money you are making” but even better “how much objective and accurate news have you placed in the world”. Unfortunately, in the news business, the first one is more important, so ethics, of course, suffers again.

Other myths are “people’s right to know” – But where is that written in the Constitution and or in Law? But we all are curious, and people may have curiosity to know, or even from time to time a need to know. But curiosity and need are not the same as a “right”. I work for a newspaper and I “need” a car to get to and from work. Although I don’t have a right to have a car. Another myth is often proclaimed: the right of public access to the media. This is an interesting myth for it conflicts with the very concept of capitalism and private property so important, for example, to the British philosopher John Locke and the American Founding Fathers. The press is private institution (business) within all Western world and the publisher and/or stockholders, like proprietors of any business, select the product to be sold. Then we come to the “myth of the newspapers”. Just check out the newspaper and you will find approx. 10% for what most editors and readers would call news. What do you think for what purposes is used other 90 %...?

***Class, Mass and Crass media***

[John Merrill](https://www.mediaethicsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3998680:merrill-john-calhoun-merrill-a-legacy-of-wisdom&catid=158,100&Itemid=486) states that there are these media: 1. Class; 2. Mass and 3. Crass. What is that?

The small part of the triangle represents the “class” media – the quality of elitist media. Below them, in the midsection of the triangle, is a much larger segment of media – the “mass” media. And at the broad bottom of the triangle are the popular, “crass”, or vulgar media. He adapted this trinary model from Plato’s three kinds of lives - the philosophic, the ambitious and the appetitive.

And the ethics travels on a bumpy road, as it goes below, and below…

The class media try to go behind the superficiality of people and events they deal with. Journalists working in such media try to get at the “why” of the news – at the causes – and not only the events.

The serious intellectual air of the class media is too ratified for most people. Therefore, the most pervasive and important of the media – at least in libertarian, capitalist country – are the mass media. There is no paucity of information in the mass media. In fact, there is such a variety of material that the consumer has a problem finding news in the vast outpouring.

The situation can be worse and, as we got lower into the media pyramid we get to the “attitudinal illiterates” that cling to the thoughtless, superficial, entertainment-and-picture-oriented, negative and sensational messages that are being generated by the crass media.

***Pageant and authenticity***

Media public is different, in principle, from the model of the square on which citizens meet to deliberate and makes decision about public businesses. Differently from the square of assembly democracy, media public is functioning in the principle, as very well selected stage with special conditions for the approach.

Ethics is questionable when you are limited to the pageant and/or staging environment which is very often presented through the need of the owners of the media and it reflects the work of professional journalist. Authenticity is jeopardized when you must be a part of the staging task regardless your honesty, objectivity and accuracy. Especially, if we are dealing with the politics within its core. Namely, the rules of pre-staging are necessary precondition for the approach to media stage, but it does not yet guarantee real approach on it in own way.

***Media melange***

One of the main reasons for the conceptual uncertainty is that relationship of media to authority caries so greatly throughout the world.

What if say, quoting John Merrill that there is but one meaningful press theory (or system): the authoritarian system. It seems that this is a more realistic way to look at media systems, none of which is free of some kind of control or direction. It also avoids the labeling stigma of some systems being more authoritarian than others (regardless if it is so call communist kind and/or capitalist kind of system). Ethics, of course, suffer in both.

In the United States, media authority is a combination of media owners and advertisers. Here we are talking about a capitalist system with a heavy overlap of Enlightenment libertarianism. In fact, this press autonomy system is the one of the four theories called the libertarian theory. It is market theory, a *laissez faire* concept, where media plutocrats rule over the press. The authority is not the government, but the media people themselves. Of course, they are influenced greatly by the advertisers and by public opinion, so that despite their separation from government control, the public media have an authority. And at least in theory, they provide the greatest message diversity of all press systems.

The State-Party is another authoritarian media system. Before we continue just to say that cultural differences determine ethics, so what is an improper system for the United States and/or United Kingdom is not improper system in Cuba and/or North Korea.

Even theoretically democratic country like Japan hide under this second type, having a closer connection or partnership with government than is clearly visible from the outside. Press clubs are common in Japan, and through them government has enormous influence over the newspapers. The press club system institutionalizes and enforces cooperative relations between journalists and the establishment, encourages self-censorship, gives journalists a sense of elitism, discourages independent investigative reporting, and encourages boring and unhelpful news.

Within this media mélange there are other media control systems, like a populist/democratic one – The authority here would rest with the people through their elected news directors, editors and publishers.

### Another possible system of state leadership and the media is a theocratic/religious authoritarianism. Here we have as the guiding authority of the society a holy book and/or religious leaders. We have seen that system possible, for a short term, in Afghanistan with the Taliban Muslim leadership in the 1990s and recently on the area of land which was temporary occupied by the side of so call Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-ISIS couple a years ago.

### In the same time we have to agree that there are many Muslim countries, especially in the Middle East, that are ruled by a combination of religious leaders (mullahs, ayatollahs, muftis) and the particular state ruler at the time. Going back in European history, one might also say that a similar authoritarianism existed with the Holy Roman Empire. Today we can see it in the Vatican State where *L'Osservatore Romano* and other Roman Catholic information media are controlled by theocratic authority. In the Arabic world, as in the Holy Roman world, this type of authoritarianism can provide considerablee stability and order to the society. However, a sin any other of the authoritarian systems, cliques and sects develop and theocrats dosagree, but in general this system would ensure social stability and viable governance.

### Of course, ethics flows in different way within the whole different kind of systems we are mentioning here and the professional journalist anywhere in the world have to be very careful if he is, for example, reporting from the certain areas, and has to have in mind that, as we said that cultural differences determine ethics.

### Another type of authoritarianism related to the media could possible exist: a subsidized media system. An entire media system could be financed by wealthy citizens, institutions and foundations. This would be different from owner-advertiser system discussed for, in this one, there would be no need for advertising. And the authorities would be the subsidizer(s).

### There is also the intellectual-elitist authoritarian system – The wise, well-trained, virtuous, intelligent, socially oriented leaders could be called “Journalistic Philosophers”. They would be the authorities. All levels of media workers would have their distinct duties and would perform them in a highly efficient and disciplined manner.

### Today the postmodern emphasis on democratization of journalism has similarities to the weakening of the Athenian state. If meritocracy (where it obtains) in the press hierarchy is overshadowed by citizen-intrusion will not fade away.

Question to think about:

How can the news consumers separate the truth from the interpretation?

Next: Media ethics in professional journalism: Ethics and war reporting

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