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**Media ethics in professional journalism:**

***Responsibilities in media***

Once upon a time I wrote this sentence (and I am still holding to it). *They say that I am exaggerating. That I cannot change anything. That ruler and the ruled ones will exist always. And I am answering that I do know that absolute freedom does not exist. But there is nothing more beautiful than combat and aspiration towards that freedom. About absolute everything has been told. And written. About freedom? We are writing.*

[According to the article 10 of European Convention of Human Rights “Freedom of speech”](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf) should only be restricted where there is a press in social need to do so for the advancement of some other important objective. Such freedom may be subject to condition prescribed by law and “necessary in democratic society in the interest of national security”.

When is in question use of the freedom in public space it should be made distinction between freedom of opinions and expression from freedom of acting and behaving. The first one is without limits, but the second one is limited. We can think whatever we want, but we cannot act on the basis of that if that opinion jeopardize freedom and rights of others, in other words, if intorduces mess, unsecurity, instability and violence within the common life.

But, should the balance exist between the interests of national security and the freedom of the press. The metaphor of the balance gives an air of objectivity to the irreducibly subjective activity of evaluating “public interest”.

Of course, there is a need to make distinction from the freedom of the expression from the freedom of the press, in other words-media.

The question arises: How to find another balance between allowing the press to inform the public about events and in the same time preventing appearances of the information that jeopardize integrity of the individual and security of the society. Difficulty lies down within both extremes – it is difficult if too much awry variety of information becomes public and by doing that if too many persons or social structure would be put in danger. Equally bad for social structure, as the whole and by that also for the individuals within it, if the government has too much control over the media. Somewhere between those two extremes we can hope and expect that real balance will be found.

*Stereotypes in media communication*

Use of the stereotypes is still most disputable problem with which contemporary media are faced. Stereotype is generally accepted mental picture about certain group that is very often applying on its members.

Patterns of the stereotypes are never neutral. However, what makes stereotypes so powerful enemies of the culture is the fact that they are often based on reality, or to be even more bluntly, some stereotypes are not so incorrect. Just try to re-think some if within your own culture and you will find very interesting outcomes.

Media contents of all sorts – news, entertainment, advertisement – are full of stereotypes. Media selection of symbols and pictures can elevate one way of living and belittle another one.

Ethics questions emerge on surface as soon as media use of stereotypes become to be so emphasized that neutralized critical ability of the auditorium to be able to bring correct judgment about certain members of the society.

Ethical dimension of media role within the creation and erasing of stereotypes is including unending combat to find a balance between commercial attraction and mass enchantment of some stereotypes against the values as are correct, fair demonstration and the respect for the individual members of the society.

I will just enumerate some of them and you will recognize existence of stereotypes:

1. Racial and ethnical minorities
2. Gender stereotypes
3. Sexual orientation
4. Senior citizens
5. Persons with special needs

*Ethical approach as presumption of professionality*

Ethical approach has the following obligations:

1. Obligation towards yourself

You must take care that your own act does not harm you. As a matter of fact, the key goal of your work is that your appearance is always excellent – to blaze at your work – and to act in a way you consider ethically correct.

1. Obligation towards the public, your audience – readers, viewers, listeners

As professional journalist you always must have obligation that within your work have a nature and expectations of your public.

1. Obligation towards employer

Whoever pays you is the serious factor. If nothing else, employee owns a firm correctly done job – product of expectations because of which the job has been offered to him.

1. Obligation towards occupation

 Majority of journalist feel the obligation towards the profession. For example, film scriptwriters feel the obligation to keep the reputation and the height of the money compensation of those who are dealing with that job. In the similar way, journalists have a feeling to help colleagues in trouble, as well as to ensure that editors and publishers understand seriously their profession.

1. Obligation towards those to whom something has been promised

Insofar as during the coverage of certain event you have promised something to somebody, you can (and you should) have a feeling to have an obligation towards those people in the moment when you continue the work on that project. Insofar as source has requested to stay anonymous, you must not reveal his/her name and even in the case when Editor consider that the article would be better if in it would be mentioned that name.

1. Obligation towards the society

Also, one of the main ethical obligation approach of the professional journalist should be obligation towards the society and encircling the responsibility towards the society in general – further improvement of the democracy, rule of law, strengthening of the human rights, etc…

Ethical approach should be encircled within three levels:

* Personal level
* Professional level
* Social level

From those two sources: system of values and ideals comes principles – foundation for ethical behavior of the professional journalists on each of those levels.

Values are everything what reflects our presumptions about social life and human nature. Values can be different, as, for example, aesthetical values (what is harmonically accepted or pleasant), professional values (speed & promptness and responsibility), logical values (consistency and competence), social-moral values (cost-effectiveness and serious work) and moral values (honesty and nonviolence).

Principles represents guidelines that comes out from ideals and values and principles comes prior to written rules.

*Code of conduct for professional journalists*

Codes of conduct are in fashion. In Britain more than 350 occupational organizations have their own codes, and the numbers are increasing each year. A similar situation obtains in several other countries, including the United States. Journalism was one of the first professions to have such codes, and it is still a source of new ones.

The interest of members of journalism trade union will not always be identical with those of the publishers of a newspaper that employs them. It would be surprising if we were to find any code drawn up by newspaper publishers which contained a clause asserting a right of journalists to have their opinions printed when these were quite contrary to the convictions of the publishers, but there would be nothing odd about finding such a clause in a code drafted by a journalism trade union.

Reporters and editors may be constrained in many ways from acting unethically. For their own job security it will be prudent for journalists to avoid acting in ways to which their proprietors might object; and because most newspapers rely so heavily on revenue from advertising, they will be under pressure not to offend major advertisers or, indeed, their readers, since a drop in circulation will lead to a reduction in advertising venue.

While it is probably true that in the majority of cases what would be illegal would also be unethical, in some cases journalists may be discouraged from pursuing an ethically correct form of action for fear of the legal consequences: occasionally, for instance, the public interest is served by the leaking of state secrets. Again, it could be unfortunate if a journalist were to refrain from giving a frank appraisal of someone’s suitability for public office for fear of the action for libel. One of the reasons for seeking not to have *statutory* codes of conduct for journalists is that they are likely to increase the range of situations in which reporters or editors are faced with a dilemma between acting legally and acting ethically.

Very important issue which should be considered is, for sure, plagiarism and protecting journalists themselves about which [Prof. Conrad Fink](https://www.redandblack.com/news/conrad-fink-legendary-grady-professor-dies-at/article_dd9bb726-fb26-5a5c-8414-1180fc28e18c.html) wrote…quote: *If ever rule was part of the journalistic fabric, it is that a reporter should not steal or rewrite another reporter’s story. Written codes of ethics don’t spell that out. Perhaps they must in the future, particularly because news work can create conditions where reporters unthinkingly can commit plagiarism.*

*Objectivity, bias and truth*

Concern of everybody should not be primarily with the way in which a report is read, but rather with the way in which journalists read the social events before them.

“Objectivity” may be defined in two different ways. To use [Richard Rorty’s](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/) wording, as “characterizing the view which would be agreed upon as a result of argument undeflected by irrelevant considerations”, and as “representing things as they really are”. It might be suggested, albeit rather naively, that a morally acceptable news report is one that represent things as they really are. Putting to the side certain complexities, such as questions of privacy, the argument would be than if the propositional content of the report corresponds to events as they actually occurred, and without subjective comment, then while the report could be shocking or boring, it could not be immoral and unjust.

A specific journalistic horizon may be identified, through which the journalist interprets reality. This horizon is constituted by the journalist’s “news values”, which is to say, by the stock, of knowledge and competences, typically taken for granted by the journalist, by which any event may be assessed as being newsworthy.

In sum, and against the demand of objectivity, while a report must have a referent and the referent is constituted as meaning only in the text. The importance that the event has to the journalist is related to the pragmatic requirements of journalism and prejudices that take the form of frameworks for interpretation, within which events maybe placed.

Journalism cannot be objective, for that purposes that an inviolable interpretation of the event as action exists prior to the report. A news report fixes the meaning of a social event, albeit that the meaning cannot be definitive (A news report is a moment n process of interpretation, and the specific interpretation chosen is “biased” by the horizon of the journalists and readers.

Truth is very difficult to hide nowadays, even if somebody wants to, especially because of the new media technology provided by Internet, and above all, social networks. But above all, the professional journalist should focus on accuracy of the story, promote the understandings and that article should be honest and balanced. Easy to do, when you respect all previously mentioned ethical requests.

*Owners, editors and journalists*

Just to remind you on [Robert Maxwell story](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Maxwell) (Daily Mirror owner) back in the nineties of the previous century. Many critics might agree that any man rich enough to buy a newspaper should not be allowed to own one, but within the current limits of the law few could disagree that owner-ship of the Mirror Group gave Maxwell every right to tell his printers how to intend to manage the company. From an ethical standpoint, however, the issue becomes more problematic when rights of ownership are extended to the editorial sphere.

If difficulties do arise and cannot be resolved in discussion with the editor, reporters have only two choices: to resign or to remove their by-line from the published story. Resignation is, not surprisingly, very much a last resort; pragmatic acceptance of the status quo s the way to self-preservation and the safeguarding of employment prospects, at last unless provocation reaches a peak. Producing a newspaper is a team operation played out under immense pressure, conditions in which “professionalism” may easily substitute for more abstract issues of “principle”.

For those journalists on the *Mirror* committed to addressing social and political issues from a left-wing perspective the choices were always stark: to leave the paper, as did Geoffrey Goodman, David Seymour and John Pilger; or to remain, like the columnist Paul Foot, in the hope of achieving something in spite of the need of careful self-censorship. Despite the editorial distortion of recent years, Mirror Group Newspapers remain the only section of the mass circulation popular press to support the Labor Party.

Sections of the quality press – [*the Guardian*](https://www.theguardian.com/international)*,* [*the Independent*](https://www.independent.co.uk/)*,* [*the Financial Times*](https://www.ft.com/) *–* have nobly maintained a public interest role, but in a changing and increasingly complex democratic society there is a need for diversity of values and perspectives that is ill served by the current by the current range of national newspapers. The press has dual function to perform, as both public institution and private industry.

Editorial independence is essential to underpin its role as watch-dog on government and business affairs, as provider of the information on which democratic decisions can be fairly made, and as the representative of public opinion and community values. At the same time, history has shown that profitability provides the best underpinning for editorial independence: the survival of the press as democratic institution depends upon its survival as an industry.

The ideal, perhaps, as *The Independent* piously suggested in a comment on the impeding change of ownership at the *Daily Mirror,* is for newspaper to be owned by people solely interested in seeing an economic return on their investment. Those who acquired titles for reasons other than profit, the paper’s leader column argued, inevitably used their purchases to peddle political and commercial influence. If the political will should ever be forthcoming there is no shortage of proposals for a radical restructuring of the press by breaking up the present heavy concentration of ownership and providing funding for new initiatives through a central funding agency. Such proposal challenges the conventional idea of “press freedom” as a property right. This is the first stage in reassessing the ethical obligations of proprietors.

*Media and antisocial behavior*

The biggest part of media content brought in question social norms. Without a story about criminal, violence, drugs and suicides, for example, press and entertainment would stay out of its dramatic vitality. It would be unreasonable and unrealistic to erase all controversial content, even if some effects on public are unpredictable. The goal must be in preparing of the strategy that will promote responsible acting towards antisocial behavior in media and to avoid approaches that encourages moral degeneration.

Professional journalists should use common sense and good taste in adjustment of the need for informing the public and the requests for the social responsibility. For example, journalist can inform the public about insufficient security at the busiest world airports, but should avoid reporting about the was how that security can be disturbed.

For the professional journalists the ethical imperative should be to responsibly transmit the news, without encouraging and not even urge further criminal and violence.

*Media content and youth – special ethical issues*

Obviously, media cannot be blamed for numerous emotional, behaviorist and moral problems that afflicts youth and adolescents, but within the measure of which media makes an influence in shaping of the point of view of the young audience world – and media does that – media must carry on with its share of responsibility.

Having in mind that mass media is significant agents of socialization, certain attention should be focused on the role of which media has within the life of young audience who are with much more knowledge and less innocence (especially after social media revolution within the last decade) as the previous generations.

Strategies should be created which will avoid intellectual and emotionally alleged timidity of the former era, and to keep feeling of moral responsibility towards kids and adolescents as the public on whom is possible to make influence within media market. Also, do not forget that younger public is not monolith. What is suitable for younger kids is not suitable for older ones.

Question to think about: Is the responsibility of the professional journalists to form or to inform, or maybe - both?

Next: Media ethics in professional journalism: Moral and responsibility (photojournalism)