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**Media ethics in professional journalism:**

*The World of a limited truth*

Dedication to the truth is the most probably and most appreciated ethical principle of the civilization. Despite our constant temptations to lie and use deceptions from the personal interests, idea of the truth as positive value is deeply implanted into the philosophy of morality and law.

One of the most convincing arguments offered by proponents of social media in news gathering, through citizen's journalism, is that they provide access to information and people that would otherwise remain unreachable.

The ongoing conflict in Syria (still in 2019) is perhaps the most striking example of this in practice.  Citizen journalists continue to document attacks on towns across the country, providing footage to news outlets which simply do not have the access to these areas.

And so, “…this video could not be verified by…” has become a recurring theme in much of the international media coverage of the conflict in Syria.

This is a highly significant disclaimer, although it is questionable whether people actually recognise this fact as they take in the footage.  Without journalistic access, questions of ethics, reliability and other issues arise when covering any event.

As brave as citizen journalists are, their work raises a number of challenges.  They are not professional journalists and they are often supporters of a certain cause, filming action as it unfolds around them.

As a result, journalists and outlets opting to use material provided by citizen journalists must be wary of promoting or producing propaganda by choosing easy and readily available sources.

Many have already begun to make bold proclamations about the future of journalism and the impact of social media.  However the reality of the situation is that this is a new and exciting terrain, with much yet to be discovered. Within the ethical issue as well.

While the need to keep their audiences updated on an increasingly regular basis is proving to be a challenge for many journalists, the opportunities afforded by social media and the ability to reach a much wider readership far outweigh this irritation.

What is clear is that journalists will have to embrace social media and online platforms if they intend to maintain relevance and engage with a wider audience in the future.

However there are important and serious problems which need to be kept in mind when exploring online platforms and it is essential that journalists do not become complacent.

If professionals and consumers alike can remain vigilant in their approach towards citizen journalism, and maintain a balanced approach, then rather than fear and trepidation, online media can be viewed with excitement.

The lines between journalism and citizen journalism may be blurring, but there are still defining factors which provide clarity to the distinction between professionals and citizens.  Just as legal definitions and legislation are being forced to recognise the importance of modern forms of media, perhaps the definition of journalism will morph in the future, and begin to account for bloggers and media activists.

But for now, the separation remains and until a code of practice or effective regulation are introduced for online media platforms, rightly so.

Online media are here to stay, but so is the practice of journalism, with the associated levels of professionalism, ethics and objectivity essential to transmitting the truth.

We could say that absolute truth is ideal towards which all professional journalists should aspire.

Professor *Frank Diver* from Alabama University in USA propose to establish continuum, one shape of ethical scale, from one to another extreme. Absolute truth would be on one end and pure lie on another end. Those who would like to give facts and information (for example, ethical journalists) would be nearby first end of the scale. Non-ethical journalists who are consciously launches untruth would be on another end of the scale. But, also, between those two there are two groups: those who have intention to convince using selective information (not the whole truth), and those who are using untruth without intention to beguile.

*Infotainment – collision of the truth and fiction and the the truth within advertising and public relations*

*Journalists should report the truth.* Who would deny it? But such a statement does not get us far enough, for it fails to distinguish nonfiction from other forms of expression. Novelists can reveal great truths about the human condition, and so can poets, film makers and painters. Artists, after all, build things that imitate the world. So do nonfiction writers.

To make things more complicated, writers of fiction use fact to make their work believable. They do research to create authentic settings into which we enter. They return us to historical periods and places that can be accurately chronicled and described. They use detail to make us see, to suspend our disbelief, to persuade us it was "really like that."

For centuries writers of nonfiction have borrowed the tools of novelists to reveal truths that could be exposed and rendered in no better way. They place characters in scenes and settings, have them speak to each other in dialogue, reveal limited points of view, and move through time over conflicts and toward resolutions.

In spite of occasional journalism scandals that hit the national landscape like plane crashes, our standards are higher than ever. Historical examples of nonfiction contain lots of made-up stuff. It appears as if, 50 years ago, many columnists, sports writers and crime reporters-to name the obvious categories-were licensed to invent. The term*piping --*making up quotes or inventing sources -- came from the idea that the reporter was high from covering the police busts of opium dens.

Testimony on our shady past comes from [Stanley Walker](https://www.amazon.com/City-Editor-Stanley-Walker/dp/0801862922), the legendary city editor of the New York Herald Tribune. In 1934 he wrote about the "monumental fakes" that were part of the history of journalism and offered..quote: „*It is true that, among the better papers, there is a "general professional condemnation" of fakers. And yet it is strange that so many of the younger men, just coming into the business, appear to feel that a little faking here and there is a mark of distinction. One young man, who had written a good story, replete with direct quotation and description, was asked by the city desk how he could have obtained such detail, as most of the action had been completed before he had been assigned to the story.*

*"Well," said the young man, "I thought that since the main facts were correct it wouldn't do any harm to invent the conversation as I thought it must have taken place." The young man was soon disabused.“...*end of quote.

The controversies continue. [Edmund Morris](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/27/obituaries/edmund-morris-reagan-biographer-who-upset-conventions-dies-at-78.html) creates fictional characters in his authorized biography of Ronald Reagan; CBS News uses digital technology to alter the sign of a competitor in Times Square during the coverage of the millennium celebration; a purported memoir of a wife of Wyatt Earp, published by a university press, turns out to contain fiction. Its author, Glenn G. Boyer, defends his book as a work of "creative nonfiction."

To make things more complicated, scholars have demonstrated the essential fictive nature of all memory. The way we remember things is not necessarily the way they were. This makes memoir, by definition, a problematic form in which reality and imagination blur into what its proponents describe as a "fourth genre." The problems of memory also infect journalism when reporters-in describing the memories of sources and witnesses-wind up lending authority to a kind of fiction.

The post-modernist might think all this irrelevant, arguing that there are no facts, only points of view, only "takes" on reality, influenced by our personal histories, our cultures, our race and gender, our social class. The best journalists can do in such a world is to offer multiple frames through which events and issues can be seen. Report the truth? they ask. Whose truth?

Caught in the web of such complexity, one is tempted to find some simple escape routes before the spider bites. If there were only a set of basic principles to help journalists navigate the waters between fact and fiction, especially those areas between the rocks. Such principles exist. They can be drawn from the collective experience of many journalists, from our conversations, debates and forums, from the work of writers such as [John Hersey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Hersey) and [Anna Quindlen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anna-Quindlen), from stylebooks and codes of ethics, standards and practices.

Hersey made an unambiguous case for drawing a bold line between fiction and nonfiction, that the legend on the journalist's license should read "None of this was made up." The author of "Hiroshima," Hersey used a composite character in at least one early work, but by 1980 he expressed polite indignation that his work had become a model for the so-called New journalists. His essay in the Yale Review questioned the writing strategies of Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Tom Wolfe.

Hersey draws an important distinction, a crucial one for our purposes. He admits that subjectivity and selectivity are necessary and inevitable in journalism. If you gather 10 facts but wind up using nine, subjectivity sets in. This process of subtraction can lead to distortion. Context can drop out, or history, or nuance, or qualification or alternative perspectives.

While subtraction may distort the reality the journalist is trying to represent, the result is still nonfiction, is still journalism. The addition of invented material, however, changes the nature of the beast. When we add a scene that did not occur or a quote that was never uttered, we cross the line into fiction. And we deceive the reader.

This distinction leads us to two cornerstone principles: Do not add. Do not deceive. Let's elaborate on each:

**Do not add.** This means that writers of nonfiction should not add to a report things that did not happen.To make news clear and comprehensible, it is often necessary to subtract or condense. Done without care or responsibility, even such subtraction can distort. We cross a more definite line into fiction, however, when we. invent or add facts or images or sounds that were not there.

**Do not deceive.** This means that journalists should never mislead the public in reproducing events.The implied contract of all nonfiction is binding: The way it is represented here is, to the best of our knowledge, the way it happened. Anything that intentionally or unintentionally fools the audience violates that contract and the core purpose of journalism-to get at the truth. Thus, any exception to the implied contract-even a work of humor or satire-should be transparent or disclosed.

*It will make you more ethical if you do not add and do not deceive.*

To make these cornerstone principles definitive, we have stated them in the simplest language. In so doing, we may cause confusion by failing to exemplify these rules persuasively or by not offering reasonable exceptions. For example, by saying "Do not deceive:' we are talking about the promise the journalist makes to the audience. A different argument concerns whether journalists can use deception as an investigative strategy. There is honest disagreement about that, but even if you go undercover to dig for news, you have a duty not to fool the public about what you discovered.

Because these two principles are stated negatively, we decided not to nag journalists with an endless list of "Thou shalt nots." So we've expressed four supporting strategies in a positive manner.

*Be unobtrusive.* This guideline invites writers to work hard to gain access to people and events, to spend time, to hang around, to become such a part of the scenery that they can observe conditions in an unaltered state. This helps avoid the "[Heisenberg effect](http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/Heisenberg-effect.html)," a principle drawn from science, in which observing an event changes it. Even watchdogs can be alert without being obtrusive.

We realize that some circumstances require journalists to call attention to themselves and their processes. So we have nothing against Sam Donaldson for yelling questions at a president who turns a deaf ear to reporters. Go ahead and confront the greedy, the corrupt, the secret mongers; but the more reporters obtrude and intrude, especially when they are also obnoxious, the more they risk changing the behavior of those they are investigating.

Stories should not only be true, they should ring true. Reporters know by experience that truth can be stranger than fiction, that a man can walk into a convenience store in St. Petersburg, Fla., and shoot the clerk in the head and that the bullet can bounce off his head, ricochet off a ceiling beam, and puncture a box of cookies.

If we ruled the world of journalism-as if it could be ruled-we would ban the use of anonymous sources, except in cases where the source is especially vulnerable and the news is of great import. Some whistleblowers who expose great wrongdoing fall into this category. A person who has migrated illegally into America may want to share his or her experience without fear of deportation. But the journalist must make every effort to make this character real. An AIDS patient may want and deserve anonymity but making public the name of his doctor and his clinic can help dispel any cloud of fiction.

Breakup of the boundaries between information and entertainment, while, for example, television is eliminating un-booked flow of the fiction based on the facts and fictious facts, for the viewers...are more and more difficult to determine what real life is and what someone’s imagination is. Result is that the viewers lose a sense for the reality.

Advertising agencies and Public relations offices/departments are within the business of persuasion and because of that some journalistic standards cannot apply on them.

Although, we still expect from them not to place incorrect information consciously. Unfortunately, the standards of truthfulness and correctness are ignored by managers of agencies allows that their loyalty to the stockholders overcome responsibility towards society.

Journalists reveals the truth, but Public relations persons sometimes is silent about the truth underlining only the best and good information we can call them firs line of defense of the institutions and companies. Advertising is little bit more problematic because two very similar and controversial techniques\_ language ambiguity when nothing concrete has been told about the product and as well exaggeration – using of superlatives.

*Telling the truth and approaches to moral judgment*

Unauthorized or unreported use of someone's literal or another artistic work is insincere. Intellectual insincerity can be divided in two categories: plagiarism and embezzlement. Although embezzlement has special legal meaning, in ethical sense means *unauthorized use* of somebody’s else artistic work. Plagiarism is, on other hand, related to “takeover of somebody’s else ideas and terms or presentation of it as your own”.

Ethically, originality and creativity are among the basic goods of professional journalism and unauthorized use of someone else’s work represent violation of the sincerity virtue. When is necessary to borrow something from another source than what is borrowed should be ascribed to that source?

As within majority of ethical dilemmas related to media, doubtlessly is that there is a space for uncertainty about what is plagiary. But, in search for guidelines we can ask ourselves two questions: 1. Did I stated all sources of the information clearly? and 2. Would average reader or viewer be able to make distinction of my and someone else’s work in regards style, structure and expression?

In regards telling the truth and approaches to moral judgment, most important rule is against lying, despite the fact that telling the truth can bring to bad consequences, as journalist publish facts about certain person and by doing that harm his/her reputation.

But, after all remember what we talked about Kant’s and Aristotle’s models in previous essays here. Who knows, sometimes works only one of them.

Question to think about: Does a limited truth sometimes works for professional journalists, or...?

Next: Media ethics in professional journalism: Morally abusive content