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Learning skills in journalistic skepticism while recognising whistleblowers

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Keywords

recognising, whistleblowers, while, skepticism, learning, journalistic, skills

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Abstract

This paper explains a didactic program of blending provocative teaching method with experiential learning - at third year of the *Bachelor of Journalism and Bachelor of Communication and Media Studies* - University of Wollongong, Australia. There are pedagogical imperatives today for developing the professional 'self' in respect to citizenship, journalistic values and practice. The challenge is to acknowledge ethics and principles of human rights, while simultaneously embracing the transforming online, open-source Internet technologies. This can be achieved through a learning combination that exposes students to 'provocative' counter news, often whistleblower generated, while setting experiential learning assignments to engage volunteer journalism sites and their aligned aspirational values. The approach first acknowledges Chomsky's propaganda model of news then it presents participants with a judicious and provocative news-flow with verifiable, current and yet alternative stories - otherwise misrepresented or omitted in mainstream news. Participants are then asked to write and publish news of their own, through the *Wikimedia Foundation* project, *Wikinews*. In association with regular 'editor' volunteers, *Wikinews* develops news-writing, increases appreciation of editorial processes and encourages respect for accuracy and due-diligence. Exposure to 'provocative news-flow' alerts participants to propaganda and assists in identifying actionable news stories. In combination, these processes connect the emerging journalist to a sense of belonging to a professional 'newsroom'. A network of volunteer practitioners, including their student colleagues and their tutor as 'chief of staff', may also develop a sustainable pool of future *Wikinews* contributors and accredited editors.

Keywords: pedagogical imperatives, *Wikinews*, Chomsky, provocative news-flow, newsroom, chief of staff, slotter, experiential learning.

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Introduction

A University of Wollongong journalism subject, *Newsroom Practice*, offers learning in news writing through the open-source Internet site *Wikinews*. Like the quality mainstream newsrooms, *Wikinews* accuracy and writing-standards are rigorous. This *Newsroom Practice* learning process first involves a carefully selected and provocative news flow, being distributed via *Facebook* by the tutor (the chief-of-staff). The news flow provides ideas, angles and potential sources for quotation; from which students may then research, write and submit fresh stories for *Wiki*-reviewers who reject or publish, after thorough fact checking and newsworthiness determination.

This chief-of-staff generated news flow was conveyed via *Facebook*, over the last 3 years, because of its prominent thumbnail images and convenient summaries at the top of each story, which serve as leads for students' initial selection. These contrary, provocative and often whistle-blower generated initiators: consist of reliable information arising from mainstream news, verified photographs and video clips, *Wikileaks* documents, scientific research papers, court transcripts, source statements, freedom of information applications, and their responses.

Extreme caution is applied at this editorial node and in the subsequent newswriting. This is because Internet based verifiable news, contrary and provocative, from outside Australia, may be subject to court suppression orders, national security laws or other restrictions, within Australia. Careless posting of such stories on *Facebook*, may constitute a serious crime, punishable by jail (Cooper 2014). Given the risky nature in publishing such news items, they are likely to be poorly represented or omitted from mainstream news.

While *Newsroom Practice* students are bombarded with these clearly verifiable stories, they are also provided occasional sprinklings of material that has less reliable, even dubious veracity. This emphasises the necessity for thorough research and fact checking, which must be enacted before students embark on their actual news writing. Care is again applied at this point, as overly politicised news or dubious origin conspiracy theories are likely to leave students feeling they should defend pre-ordained positions and values, and this is counterproductive.

The daily leads (introductions) on the *Facebook* Timeline, provide a specific news frame, like reported rebel activity in Ukraine. Students then follow up on that story in detail in both *Russia Today* and the *New York Times*, or in the US based *Foreign Policy Magazine*. Students first check newsworthiness, then determine if there is conflict of fact, or whether omission or skew is evident. They then angle the story and write neutrally oriented fresh

news: with balance, completeness and detachment - for posting up for review on *Wikinews*.

The process brings realisation of the ethical imperatives of accurate and verifiable news-writing. Students start to contextualise the role of mainstream news in international affairs. They begin to see propaganda for what it is and when confronted by obvious omissions from mainstream news services, they ask: why do mainstream news media fail to run these stories? Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony Or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* is used at this juncture, as an early bench-marker in the learning schedule (Chomsky 2003).

The *Facebook* news flow delivers stories that are deliberately polarising, like the ever-worsening war in Syria. The news items are arranged to exemplify how news media disseminate propaganda in carefully constructed campaigns, helpful to elite interests and often on the path to war (Jones 2014). *Newsroom Practice* students are reminded that while the Internet provides world superpowers their global surveillance capability, it also provides voice and research capabilities for the second superpower – world public opinion (Chomsky 2003).

On this chief-of-staff generated *Facebook* Timeline, where even hackers may contribute, the student-citizen-journalists observe the editorial node and note the contrary news flow. Working in such a learning schedule, students develop a range of professional literacies and values, including those informing citizenship (Reece & Blackall 2007). By researching, writing and interacting with the tutor (chief-of-staff) and then with the *Wiki*-reviewers: students begin to habitually adhere to rigorous standards of accuracy, originality and source checking. Our previous research in the context of a television newsroom for high school students, also demonstrated that such a peer review and collegial process, develops multiple literacies and values that uphold ethical journalism and notions of citizenship (Blackall, Lockyer & Harper 2011).

For *Newsroom Practice*, the minimum assignment requirements are five news stories over thirteen weeks, all thoroughly researched and written for publication on *Wikinews* - a difficult task, because students must firstly negotiate the protocols of the open source networked site. Simultaneously, students must edit at least five colleagues' stories, with every edit being transparent on *Wikinews* 'History' - ideal for assessment purposes. The final combination of both the attempted, and the published stories, are posted with a 1000 word reflection on a blog.

Rationale - learning news production under emergency conditions

The pedagogy in *Newsroom Practice* assumes that mainstream journalism is failing to

expose the big deceptions of our time. Learning is situated in a newsroom, where the systematic behaviours and performance patterns of global newsroom production are evident. Such an enabling-environment positions students to interpret the political issues around framing in the mainstream news. The chief-of-staff *Facebook* feed is the central element for the fresh perspective on the ‘must run’ news imperatives, otherwise unreported, omitted or misrepresented in the mainstream. By choosing stories this way, in the public interest and ideally, beyond the propaganda interests of the power elite, students shape journalistic values and professional skills and credentials - as required by mainstream news agency employers.

To set the context of the emergency, students are recommended online films like *Shadows of Liberty*, which reveal the extent of news censorship, obfuscation and corporate control. *Shadows of Liberty* in particular, examines global corporate influence, of totalitarian dimension, which distorts journalism and compromises values in truth telling. Interviews with prominent journalists, activists and academics, show the dysfunctional nature of the English language news media. The documentary asks a basic question: “why have we let a handful of powerful corporations write the news?” (Tremblay 2013).

In 2010, the G20 countries aimed to have effective legislation and policy by 2012, for the protection of whistle-blowers, a necessary measure for the free flow of information in democratic processes. This would provide safe and reliable avenues for whistle-blowers to report fraud, corruption and other illegal behaviour. The reality, however, is that new laws in national security and anti-terrorism, with non-disclosure provisions, are tending to override any attempts at whistle-blower protection. A case in point is Australia.

The series of bills enacted since September 11 2001, the culmination of which is the Anti-Terrorism Bill (No. 2) 2005, removes many of the freedoms and rights that Australians have for many years been able to take for granted. In particular, the detention and control orders degrade the importance of the role of formal trials and the production of credible evidence by the prosecution in the administration of justice in this country (Rix 2006).

In such a regime, “whistle-blower protection laws fail to meet international standards, and fall significantly short of best practices” (Wolfe et al, 2014). The future for press freedom is therefore most likely to be in an inverse relationship to the aspirations of the G20. Instead, national security measures will override considerations of democratic process, with secrecy becoming the norm (Blackall & Tenkate 2008). This means that many state initiated human rights violations, such as those carried out in Australian asylum seeker detention centres, will be impossible to expose. Similar trends are observable in most first-world English language nations. In 2014, *Newsroom Practice* students examined recently proposed Australian national security legislation, and they noted commentators’ saying it “is dangerously imprecise and does not take account of the public interest in any shape or form, . . . is a threat to freedom of information and a violation of international

standards,” (Ismail 2014).

This chilling effect on journalism and transparency brings new pedagogical realities for journalism educators: we must encourage students to use new media platforms and provide journalistic information in the public interest. Such a strategy should also advocate for the return of traditional press freedoms, once enjoyed by citizens of Western democracies. In his analysis of a case study about the process of invigorating public opinion to counter corporate totalitarianism, Ahmed examined the ruling elite and its neoliberalism tendency to “press upon” the people: to preside over them, to influence, to convince, to propagandise, to force upon them social change to the advantage of multi-national corporations. Ahmed focused on the corporate power of Enron, which in 1992 ran the Indian Maharashtra State-Electricity-Board, known as the Dabhol Power Project. The venture was the largest in India’s corporate history.

The presence of power that “presses upon” does not negate the possibility of subaltern counter-politics. In fact, the presence of power that presses upon also gives rise to productive power, or the power to resist and transform (Foucault 1979). The power of those adversely affected by neoliberalism is dependent on their alliances, relations, networks and counterhegemonic discourses. The nexuses, alliances, social relations, accessibilities or networks that facilitate the subaltern counter-public (Fraser 1990) in creating a more transcendent and universal politics (Harvey 1996) and empowering them to put up a viable challenge or alternative to neoliberalism, is captured relatively well by the idea of rescaling. This is because the vertical or hierarchical conceptualization of scale encapsulates a pragmatic understanding of power (Ahmed 2012).

Enron’s production of spin was inevitable, for the purposes of framing the Dabhol Power Project to the corporation’s advantage, but India’s diverse news media industry can at times run contrary to corporate agendas. India’s huge audiences and the competition amongst news media to attract them, delivers the potential for vigorous and independent journalism. This is a moment of power and an opportunity for more of the daily news decisions to be rendered in the name of neutrality and civil liberties. Ahmed argues that we must undertake a rescaling of public information: “through alliances, relations, networks and counter-hegemonic discourses”. This, he says, is itself a process of empowerment. It is a moment when hegemonic discourses may be scrutinised with fresh perspectives; providing opportunities to shift the frame towards a freedom of expression that is underpinned by universal civil and human rights.

Framing

Entman’s cascade activating model of framing is useful here, where it is a given that the news frame is manipulated by the power elite. This is demonstrable, through the power

elite's control of selected sources, its misusing quotes, data and footage, while hiding other information from view. A journalistic activism, coupled with meticulous accuracy, can be a strategy to help get students published, while simultaneously providing truthful and accurate information in the public interest. Framing theory proposes that the extent and rate of framing is proportional to inequity and power, which motivates the selection and highlighting of certain narratives over others. Therefore, journalism learning schedules must be designed so students are encouraged to make "connections among them [news narratives] so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman 2004). In such a context, a truly free news media sources official information from government and multi-national corporations, while simultaneously balancing each news point with wide ranging views from the public. This enables the public to deliberate independently in democratic processes. Instead, and increasingly, news media narratives are political contests within pre-determined agenda setting news media frames (Entman 2004), many of which, after investigation, are found to be commercially oriented.

For journalism students, thinking about frames is useful when demystifying a range of news related information: across science stories, political stories, and stories about the media itself, or other key public institutions. 'Frames' situate the interpretative story-lines that will communicate the facts in an issue. Framing research can be used to explain how protagonists define certain issues in politically strategic ways. Framing is also a first step in determining the angle in a news story, and this may be done unconsciously. Once aware of this, journalists are able to consciously use framing to select the news of the day, and this may improve their independence and judgment, so they might be more responsive to a diverse range of public discourse. Frames can help simplify complexities, by weighing up certain details and news angles over others, to assist in determining why an issue is newsworthy and who or what might be responsible.

Nisbet (2012) acknowledges how shifting, or "breaking 'the frame' so to speak is very difficult". For journalism education however, it is critical to present dynamic and challenging case studies that develop strong news judgment and values for independence and press freedom, necessary for skeptical and whistleblower generated journalism. Such values bring awareness of propaganda, while writing journalism that is encouraging of public dialogue, public interest and the exchange of perspectives.

The chief-of-staff *Facebook* feed provided a number of science related stories, that were absent from mainstream news, and these usually were sourced from scientific papers. Critical in science-based news-stories, are understandings on the principles of scientific method - the process of testing and retesting for validation.

. . . there has been a growing recognition that scientific knowledge alone does not compel public perceptions or policymaker decisions. Instead, these innovators understand that effective communication involves addressing an intended

audience's values, interests, and worldviews (Nisbet 2012).

Students delving into science news-writing must understand that scientific conclusions crucially depend on verifying and repeating the experiment for the same results. This must include the successful simulation of recent observations, to test for validity. In finding a suitable pedagogical approach to these considerations, we need to hold that “science communication is no longer defined as a process of transmission, but rather as an active and ongoing conversation with a range of stakeholders”, including journalists (Nisbet 2012).

The chief-of-staff *Facebook* Timeline, as discussed here, actively included a science frame and this was made available to a range of University of Wollongong journalism subjects. The Timeline is tuned to show how science related stories are misrepresented in news and current affairs. Subsequently, news stories are deconstructed in tutorials, so students notice well-trodden and easily approved story-telling templates where journalists depart from the required fact checking and triangulation.

A radio story broadcast by the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* in 2012 carried the news trigger of a serious bacterial outbreak after floods in Queensland. Instead of a bacteriologist as the concluding expert source to the story's crisis point, a climate scientist is sourced instead, bringing a different frame to the conclusion, in a story about a looming public health emergency. The inaccuracy in the choice of this source is that climate change was not the cause of heavy rain in the La Niña event of 2012; rather the record floods were similar to the even wetter La Niña cycles in Australia in 1974, 1975 and 1976. In the interest of public health, and therefore public interest, this story should have concentrated the frame, and therefore the interviewed source, on leptospirosis and the cautionary public health procedures, instead of the irrelevant climate frame in the final section of the story.

RACHEL CARBONELL [ABC radio journalist]: With climate scientists predicting more extreme weather events, some experts *say* [SIC] outbreaks of leptospirosis are likely to become more of a problem. Philip Weinstein is professor of ecosystem health at the Barbara Hardy Institute at the University of South Australia.

PHILIP WEINSTEIN: We're likely to be seeing more and more of these events as more extreme climate events occur more frequently and as urban populations grow (Carbonell 2012).

Traditionally, free speech and journalism (with accuracy and impartiality) go hand in hand with the principles of transparency in Western democratic societies (Steel 2012). However increasingly, news media editorial decisions are under pressure with a range of likely editorial directions and truths, which leads to confusion. At the editorial node,

journalists are more likely to be inaccurate and responsive to spin and hidden corporate directives (Schulte 2014). In such a climate, journalist's news decisions are likely to be cautious, conservative and self-serving for career survival, rather than for commitment to the ethical imperatives of accuracy and free speech.

Similarly misrepresented in mainstream news, and regularly conveyed to *Newsroom Practice* students, are stories on the extent of wealth being increasingly transferred to a handful of globally elite families. A case in point, and omitted from mainstream news, was the recent USA Senate Bill, 2277, directing the Agency for International Development to guarantee loans for the mining of oil and gas in the Ukraine.

Vice President Biden's son [Hunter] has become the head of the biggest fracking company in the Ukraine. And what's not usually known is that the armies from Kiev that are marching into the Eastern of Ukraine have been basically protecting the fracking equipment (Hudson & Desvarieux 2014).

In *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Bondage Destroy the Global Economy* (in publication for 2015), Michael Hudson, Professor of Economics at the University of Missouri, observes how the financial crises will continue unless there is complete overhaul of the global system. Inaction, he says, will increasingly enable elite families to get control of the most influential of the multinational corporations. This private sovereignty, which also presides over government, the news media and multinational corporations generally, will ensure that inheritance is the only means by which power transmits from one generation to the next. This is now also being coupled with record salary rises for the highest earners, thus amplifying world income inequality and increasing poverty (Piketty 2013).

The chief of staff or 'slotter'

When journalists determine the angle for news, or they omit a frame, their decisions are based on learnt values and these continue to shape journalistic practice. Such determinants 'govern each stage of the reporting and editing process' (Cotter 2010). Unless the professional practice in a news agency is impartial, with rigorous professional safeguards to maintain neutrality, it is likely that internal processes may at times produce poorly researched journalism that amounts to propaganda. A learning schedule designed to build decisive and skeptical 'coal-face' journalism, which aims to publish for *Wikinews*, holds pivotal the chief-of-staff active role at the early editorial node. The strategy aims to shift the usual frame on which stories receive the 'must-run' grading and which ones do not.

Clearly, this is an important point in newsroom decision-making, and the USA Federal

Communications Commission thinks so. In 2013 the FCC announced it was planning to place a federal agent inside newsrooms across the country and this prompted “media watchdogs to accuse the government of trying to restrict press freedom”.

The FCC first announced the plan, known as the 'Multi-Market Study of Critical Information Needs,' (CIN) last year. It presented vague notions about how FCC officials would observe “*the process by which stories are selected,*” including notions of “*perceived station bias*” and “*perceived responsiveness to underserved populations*” (Russia Today 2014)

When considering news production in the Propaganda Department (Xuan Chuan Bu) in P. R. China, or the methods of Stasi police in East Germany around 1974, students can note how ‘other professionals’ alongside journalists play pivotal roles within the editorial and gatekeeping processes. Today, newsrooms of many democratic nations are enduring cost cutting measures, which force lawyers and other professional associates from the usual editorial processes. This lack of experienced legal advice, that traditionally found ways to enable a story to run, now brings caution, even self-censorship - especially to those stories related to national security (Blackall 2013).

Similarly, bloggers without legal support or adequate professional preparation are also likely to be reactive and so risk libel, breach of national security laws, contempt and a raft of new laws restraining publication (Cooper 2014). Consequently, journalists, students and bloggers are likely to stay clear of these stories, for fear of prosecution or humiliation. This results in neglect of stories that may disagree with the dominant narrative, bringing attenuation and an overriding effect of non-disclosure and secrecy.

Boyer examined the role of news agency journalism, and specifically, its mechanics at this editorial node: “an increasingly important node in circuits of news communication across the world”. He studied a medium-sized news-agency office in Germany, focusing on ‘slotwork’, where one editor is responsible for coordinating incoming news streams and determining ‘must-run’ news.

The terms ‘slotter’ and ‘slotting’ are material metaphors themselves. They reference a pre-digital division of labour in newsmaking in which an editor distributed writing assignments by putting sheets of paper into wooden boxes, pigeonholes or ‘slots’. In print journalism this was a relatively low status form of editorial activity often lumped in with copyediting. And, in the digital era of print and broadcast journalism, ‘slotting’ has dwindled into a terminological archaism. But, in news agency journalism, the role took on greater significance because of the pressure to manage breaking news on a fast-time basis. Slotters operated as coordinating editors whose job it was to survey incoming news, to assign tasks to their shift’s writers, to edit their draft Meldungen (reports) and to send these out on the agency wire.

. . . slotwork exists in a complex of technologically - and organisationally enabled practices that is evolving between professional tradition and contemporary influence, between technological automaticity and human agency, between attention and distraction, between *O`ffentlichkeit* (publicity) and market, between producer and client, between praxiological and mediological modes of understanding (Boyer 2011).

As discussed, this ‘slotwork’ with a contrary and strategic frame, established by referring to *contrasting sources*, enables students of *Newsroom Practice* to find alternative, yet truthful and verifiable news perspectives in international affairs. This also provides benchmarks for thinking about the forces at work that qualify and subvert impartiality. Simultaneously sourcing angles from either side of important world news stories across the agency spectrum, ranging from *Russia Today* to *The New York Times*, enables students to see that the news media depend heavily and uncritically on elite information sources that are most likely to be politically aligned.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote how contradiction is universal and absolute; it is within the developmental processes of everything. For *Wikinews* writing, in deciding what must run and what is excluded, contradiction in news is offered on *Facebook* so that it permeates the process, from beginning to end (Nietzsche 1872). Similarly, Mao Tse Tung’s *On Contradiction* (1937) discussed how paradox comprises and absorbs power from this totality of opposites. Such disunited, or dialectical, opposites drive the interdependence of the contradictory politics and so can be acknowledged in the interplay when learning the cognitive processes of decision making that determine news angles.

Whistle-blowers, value development and local contacts

When students of *Newsroom Practice* were repeatedly exposed to news emanating from human rights advocates, and whistle-blowers, their appreciation of the role of The Fourth Estate was accelerated. Exposure to such stories stimulates value development, and can demonstrate how international stories may have potential to be written with local relevance. This ‘linking’ by way of the ‘slotter’, simply provides contacts, with opportunities to interview locally relevant sources. Of mild interest to mainstream news in 2014, except within the general news frame of illegality, were disclosures by Edward Snowden of massive government and corporate surveillance of the public by the NSA (Macaskill & Dance 2013). This brought the public realisation of the new global Orwellian reality (Katz 2014). Where possible, such international whistle-blower stories can be angled by the ‘Slotter’ and then saturated with local relevance, human interest and

original reporting opportunities.

Locally angled human-interest news-writing builds self-esteem and interpersonal skills for students. The realities of local practice, through such organisational procedures, brings heterogeneity, instead of the global homogenisation that scholars generally say applies to mainstream news. Clausen (2003) suggests that globalised news production, is really an amalgam of localised inputs and production processes, which initially occur through framing and the organisational imperatives of local news production: hindrances, availability of sources for interview and the cultural practices that make up the brand of the particular news agency.

One instance of this localisation and human-interest angle for Wollongong based students of *Newsroom Practice*, was the ongoing story about *WikiLeaks* lawyer Jennifer Robinson, who was stopped in transit in 2012 at Heathrow (London), on the basis that she was on an “inhibited fly list”.

Upon arriving at Heathrow airport to catch a flight back to Australia, Jennifer Robinson tweeted "just delayed from checking in because I'm apparently "inhibited" – requiring approval from Australia House @dfat to travel." She was referring to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Russia Today 2012).

The ‘Slotter’ (chief-of-staff tutor) introduced to students the idea of them conducting an email interview with the human rights activist Robinson, who was initially from the Wollongong region. Students were encouraged to contact and quote her, thus increasing proximity and currency in their stories and so the potential of their successful publishing. The Jennifer Robinson story continues to provide news-writing opportunities, especially on occasions when she returns and is interviewed by Australian mainstream news agencies (Jones 2014).

Another localised case study, with ongoing international ramifications, was provided to *Newsroom Practice* in 2014. The tragic disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370, also had a local Wollongong expert source, and students were encouraged to interview him with the view of publishing the news story on *Wikinews*. *The New York Times* wrote:

Adam Dolnik, a professor at the University of Wollongong in Australia who has studied terrorism in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world, said that, judging from the information disclosed so far, there was no evidence to suggest involvement

by a terrorist organization (Bradsher & Buckley 2014).

Dolnik was regularly meeting with the 'Slotter' at the time, an arrangement that increased source agreeability and accessibility to students.

Conclusion

Mainstream news agencies engender values through the day-today practice of news production, and these are essentially impacted through informal training, by way of emulation. Young professionals, as Levy puts it, are often 'enculturated' into the use of certain behaviours: of deception, of agenda setting as determined by safe and unchallenged writing, or by way of the lazy use of one source. These are all culturally inculcated in a gradual and experiential manner. "The situational pressures which characterize journalism, at least as it is structured today, are therefore likely to overwhelm the resources of character, no matter how good our education, no matter how virtuous our students" (Levy 2002). Journalism students therefore need habitual best practice in their learning schedules. This develops alongside multiple literacy abilities, skepticism with open-minded perspectives, and enables students to habitually function truthfully as they see that journalism should only be executed this way.

This also encourages a belief that Fourth Estate journalism requires adherence to higher principles of justice and may require occasional moments of civil disobedience to achieve such a standard (Kohlberg 1986). This is executed with cautionary strategies for reasons of survival in the workplace. For journalism, justice is the fundamental perspective through which competing claims around publishing truth are mediated. The *Wikinews* site structures accurate writing conventions as a process of this justice resolution, and the process is transparent in the online 'History'. Such a framework, like the *Wikinews* site, is based on a conception of justice and is linked to codes of ethics that are underpinned by international covenants on civil and human rights.

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