

Radical Media Ethics

Responding to a Revolution

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Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end. Henry David Thoreau

When we do journalism, media ethics is the responsible use of the freedom to publish. When we reflect on our work, media ethics is normative interpretation of practice. Normative interpretation starts with a social practice such as law or journalism, and around which there is usually some agreement on who is a practitioner and on clear examples of the practice. Interpretation articulates the purpose of the practice by considering it “in its best light.”¹ Given this purpose, it says what the practice requires in terms of standards.

For example, I evaluate journalism according to two tiers of criteria. The first tier identifies “base conditions” for the building of a robust press. The base conditions include freedom of expression, independence of newsrooms, and sufficient economic stability. These conditions must be realized to some extent before we can dream of other things. The second tier consists of “democratic” criteria. It says that once the freedom to publish is established, media should promote egalitarian, participatory democracy. I stress citizen participation in all aspects of media, but I also favor certain types of participation. I look for media spaces that allow reasoned dialogue across differences – what I call dialogic journalism. And I want news media to be globally minded. Journalism should have an ethical impulse to promote human flourishing and democratic structures worldwide, reduce conflict, build cultural bridges, and advance social justice. The philosophical basis of this view is my ethical cosmopolitanism.

But what happens when we have a practice where there is no consensus about norms and no agency to enforce standards to protect the public? This is media ethics today. Our media revolution creates multiple interpretations with competing norms and, sometimes, a remarkable ambivalence about the need for any ethical rules.

Media ethics, like media, is in turmoil.

Trends

Most of the turmoil is generated by two macro-trends. One is the emergence of a “mixed news media.” News media is “mixed” because many types of practitioners use many types

of technology to create many types of content. The other macro-trend is a media with global impact and reach. Mixed media puts pressure on a mainstream ethics designed for a different era. Globalization challenges parochial notions of journalism's duties.

In mainstream North American media, one reality is *angst* about layoffs of thousands of journalists, as ad revenue migrates to Google and other online giants. The once proud legacy media, their future value now uncertain, are sold for bargain prices. Magazines go digital only, while papers reduce print publishing and erect pay walls online. Beat reporters are laid off, or reassigned. Recently, the *Chicago Sun-Times* laid off its 28 photojournalists. Images will now come from reporters and citizens. Examples of this new media ecology were on display recently as Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, bought the *Washington Post*. The *NY Times* unloaded the *Boston Globe* to Red Sox owner John Henry for 4% of what the *Times* paid for it over a decade ago. And IBT, a digital-only media company, bought *Newsweek*, and paid the once dominant magazine the faint compliment of still having "some cachet". 'Journalism is dying' is a common phrase.

Alongside this angst, there is a less noticed revolution going on inside these smaller mainstream newsrooms. Editors combine old and new media to re-connect with dwindling audiences with their smart phones and a thousand sources of information. The idea is to change a news organization from a "fortress" to a community convenor. The mantras are: Digital first. Innovate or die. Connect or be disconnected. Share or be ignored. One editor put it this way: "content – curation – community". It is now cool to experiment. Creative thinkers, who run incubators and accelerators, are hired to help the legacy folks understand the new media universe – the way a teenager clues in her parents about a new device. Conferences on the future of journalism, where workshops explain how to use Facebook as a reporting tool, invite the heads of Yahoo or Gawker to headline the event, not the editor of the Cleveland newspaper. Meanwhile, the *Washington Post* starts an internet TV site and creates its own programs; the *Wall Street Journal* creates a video site where citizens learn about issues such as 'Obamacare' in edgy, interactive ways.² Crowdsourcing melds work by the professional and the citizen. For example, the *New York Times* creates a site where human rights groups and other people can post video from fighting in Syria.³

The glut of information encourages new aggregators and new gatekeepers, only they are called "filters" of content. In Silicon Valley, a new start up called Ozy media promises to identify the best online stories for what it calls the "change generation."⁴ Listen to the promo for the site: "It's OZY Time... Almost! Hungering for the newest, neatest, next-est? ... Worldly but not wordy, deep but not dull, OZY is the field manual for people who want to do more and be more." Or, listen to this description of a new project, written by the Nieman Journalism Lab: "The French business daily, *Les Echos*, is about to release an aggregation tool that allows editors to identify the best business articles by surveying the what is topical on their journalists' Twitter accounts. The article says, pompously, that the daily is "betting on an algorithms + human aggregation strategy both for its readers and as a B2B play." No one in news media talked this lingo a few years ago!

Partnerships are now all but necessary. Some organizations like the Guardian newspaper see an opportunity for a new "open journalism" where citizens and professionals collaborate. Oregon Public Broadcasting is sharing stories with dozens of local newspapers around Oregon to construct an online wire service for editors.

Ethical Issues

I am sure you sense a host of ethical questions hovering around these trends. Does working quickly eliminate verification and tolerate inaccuracy? With whom should you partner? How do we validate citizen content? In the search for interactivity, do we lose sight of the slow, lonely work of investigative journalism? Are these new kids on the block really journalists?

Not even the US Senate Judicial Committee can define ‘journalist’. In that august forum, politicians are struggling to devise a federal law to shield journalists from revealing sources. But first we need to define a journalist. The bill defines a journalist as a person who has a “primary intent to investigate events and procure material” in order to inform the public “by regularly gathering information through interviews and observations.” But some politicians fear this would include citizen journalists and those who work for WikiLeaks to reveal government secrets. So, the debate on who is a journalist continues.

To their credit, a large number of mainstream associations, from the BBC to the Canadian Association of Journalists, are articulating new ethics for the integrated newsroom. For example, guidelines are being produced on how to use social media when reporting a breaking story. The same reflection on “best practices” is occurring among responsible online publishers.⁵ This new ethics is a work in progress. It seeks to integrate traditional ideas of verification and unbiased journalism with online values of sharing and opining. Sometimes, however, it seems the mainstream is trying to square the circle. Editors encourage journalists to “brand” themselves with personal comments on their own online sites yet warn them not to undermine their impartiality. In this context, what is acceptable commentary is a vague and wavering line, and crossing the line can get you fired.

Trends are also causing worries about independent journalism. The proliferation of publishers raises thorny issues. Some people react positively to the saying, “today, anyone with a laptop can be a publisher.” There is joy in Mudtown, USA, as people share and tweet, skirt the former gate-keepers, and watch media corporations lose power. Yet this enthusiasm ignores ethical downsides – the harm that can come from publishing. It ignores who is doing the publishing, whether it is a cyber-bulling teenager or a Holocaust denier.

Do we, as citizens online, have “digital responsibilities”? Some people appear to think not. They seem to think that there is something about online publishing that argues against a restraining ethics which, however, is needed for mainstream journalism. When the web site Reddit, Twitter, and then re-tweeting mainstream journalists misidentified a Brown University student, Sunil Tripathi, as a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings, the potentially harmful links among social media and the mainstream, both working to be first with news, became evident. A *New York Times Magazine* article noted rightly that, not long ago, such a rumor would have taken time to reach the public – hopefully, enough time to debunk it before publishing. But not now. Interestingly, some people interviewed responded to criticism with a passive attitude: This is the world we live in. We can’t do anything about it. Another reply was that Reddit and similar sites are “contained spaces of speculation.” The nature of their platforms means that no one is responsible to verify what is shared or ‘voted up’ on a site. Another view was that retweeting doesn’t mean you say it’s true. These defences only cause me to worry more.

Another implication of ‘everyone is a publisher’ is that powerful corporations and advertisers can easily do journalism to attract customers to their web sites and Twitter

feeds. This is called “brand journalism”. Rather than the hard sell of advertising, which lacks credibility, corporations use journalists and their story-telling to brand products, and trade on their credibility. For instance, Cisco Systems of California, which sells computer networking equipment, employs journalists to write stories on the technology sector on its web site, *The Network*.⁶ The site for Red Bull energy drink features stories on ‘extreme’ sports.⁷ In many cases, these journalists agree to never criticize their brand, or highlight the competition.

However, brand journalism is often engaging. Public distrust of mainstream media means that many people don’t care (or don’t know?) who produces the journalism, Red Bull or News Corporation. So what’s the big deal? The deal is this: Either, the idea of editorial independence is being compromised; or, independence is being redefined. Pick your favorite interpretation.

Similar questions arise for new forms of “agenda-driven” journalism. Take, for example, the decision by right-wing political groups in the United States to train journalists to write about politics from their point of view. Libertarian groups such as the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity have funded websites in dozens of states to cover legislatures. Like the corporate branders, these web sites, such as www.wisconsinreporter.org, recruit professional journalists. The reporting reflects a political ideology such as lower taxes, less government, and individual liberty. These reporters claim they are non-partisan journalists who report the facts like other journalists. They say they follow the tenets of impartial reporting as found in the code of the Society of Professional Journalists.

So, from our perch amid the media revolution, how do we evaluate politically driven journalism or corporate brand journalism? Aren’t these developments new forms of journalism that diversify the public sphere? Even if the sites are partial, what is wrong with that? After all, don’t we know that there is no such thing as objective journalism, and that mainstream media pursue their own agendas? Does it matter who produces the journalism? Or, do we feel uncomfortable because such arguments seem to prove too much. They seem to undermine the notion of independent journalism in the public interest.

Traditional notions from media ethics are not very useful in clarifying these issues. For example, traditional news objectivity implied that all forms of opinion journalism were equal – all were subjective expressions of opinion. But today, in a world of opining, we need notions that help us distinguish between better and worse analysis. In a world of advocational journalism, we need a basis for distinguishing advocacy from propaganda. Once we leave the island of objective ‘straight’ reporting, we find ourselves on a roiling sea of multiple forms of journalism, multiple publishers, and multiple funding models. Our once clear and simple distinctions blur and collapse, and we are not sure what to say.

What to Do?

Given these trends, what should we do? One area where change can come, on an institutional level, is public policy on media. This is not one of my areas of expertise, but I will say this. I favor agencies that reduce media concentration. I favour strong support for public broadcasting, and incentives to create alternate media such as hyper-local web sites, low-power FM stations and other starts ups that serve communities inadequately

covered by large media. Also, in this interactive world, there is potential for new forms of accountability. For example, we can set up citizen-based, online media councils that monitor complaints but also advance media education.

Perhaps however, despite what I have said, you still feel that we “do gooders” are out-numbered and out-resourced by irresponsible media users. The latter are shaping negatively the evolution of media. Rather than despair, we can respond in several ways.

First, we can extend our criticism beyond the mainstream to include popular and powerful online operations such as Reddit and Twitter. We should hold to ethical account everyone who publishes. No one has a “get out of ethics” card because they operate a trendy media venture. I was dismayed when I read the responses of some of the writers who caused the misidentification of Tripathi. The responses struck me as smug, unreflective, or incredibly insensitive to the potential harm of publishing on the fly, especially where everyone becomes a breaking news reporter. Therefore, I believe the ethical ‘heat’ has to be turned up on online mis-practices. We need to question the often glib, hypocritical and self-serving justifications offered as rationales for unethical practice. Maybe it is time for a sixth estate – a coalition for ethical practice that will challenge the current online fifth estate. Just as the latter monitor the ethical lapses of the mainstream, we should do the same to them.

Most importantly, we need to question the philosophy behind the rationales. The philosophy, more often than not, is an over-enthusiastic gospel about the democratic virtues of unrestrained and unfiltered online voices. We need to counter with a better theory of democratic media. We need to argue, strenuously, that democratic media is more than a free media online, unrestrained by “old fashioned” mainstream talk of responsibilities. We need to advance a concept of dialogic, democratic media that shows that unrestrained free expression, by itself, is not enough for healthy pluralistic democracies. Democracy in a plural society is more than a clash of voices, more than communication unmediated by mainstream media. It is more than media participation. Democracy is civic participation in defining the common good through a communication exchange where participants listen and learn. Participants engaged in reasoned and informed debate. In their media practices, they are ever mindful of the impact of publishing on others. Citizen journalism is not only the right to self-express oneself and to clash verbally with others. It is also the right and duty to communicate as a responsible citizen willing to challenge my own assumptions, not simply to point out the presumptions of my interlocutors.

Fortunately, new technology gives us another option, something beyond criticism. We can create new and counter-balancing media structures committed to ethical ideals. One such structure is the development on nonprofit journalism. Across the United States, centers for nonprofit investigative journalism have sprung up, financed by foundations and individual donors. Jon Sawyer left mainstream media to create the award-winning nonprofit *Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting* in Washington, D.C. He wanted to fill the need for independent foreign reporting. At the same time, journalism schools increasing do the real-world journalism in the public interest that is lacking among commercial media. Other forms of nonprofit work, such as NGOs, are leading the creative use of media for advocational journalism and social engagement. For example, the non-profit women’s media outlet, *World Pulse*, which has 18,000 members, aims “to harness the power of women to accelerate women’s impact for change.” Earlier this year it completed its “Girls Transform the World” campaign to draw attention to the education of girls

around the world. The site, started by a young female journalist in Portland, Oregon, used crowdsourcing to get girls and women to identify and share stories on barriers, while seeking solutions. The result was a compilation of 350 stories from hundreds of people in over 60 countries, which formed the basis of a communique sent to the G20 leaders.

These new media entities have potential as stand-alone initiatives. But they can have additional impact if they unite with others. There are powerful web sites where global bloggers, professional reporters and others track human rights abuses. There are global networks of nonprofit journalism centers. And professionals can help citizens around the world. For instance, Fred Ritchin, a Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist, has created the PixelPress website, which helps humanitarian groups develop digital media projects. There are many centers, such as my Turnbull Center, that are anxious to find partners and projects that will have positive impact on the leading edges of journalism. We can develop counter-balancing global networks of citizens and journalists gathered under the umbrella of media ethics and global democratic journalism. New media, legacy media and education units can join to shape the media universe.

For most of my life, media criticism consisted of studies that noted the sins of mainstream journalism from scholars and former journalists sitting on the sidelines. Today, the critics can join the players on the field. They can do what I call “media ethics activism” which is summed up in the phrase: “If you don’t like the media you’re getting, create your own media.”

In these ways, and in other ways, we can preserve, at the heart of our media systems, a significant core of responsible communicators. Negative macro trends can only be balanced by positive macro-sized resistance.

Finally, there is an important educational aspect to reform. If it is media ethics for everyone, and if publishers are proliferating, we need to introduce media ethics, and media literacy, early in our education system. Universities need to teach media ethics across the curriculum, not confine it to journalism schools.

Hopefully it is clear from what I have said that, within the field of media ethics, we need a radical approach. Radical in philosophy and conceptualization. “Radical” means from the root. Farmers talk of a radical root on plants that seek water. We need to re-invent media ethics from the ground up. Piecemeal improvements are not sufficient. A conservative strategy of defending existing norms at all costs is foolhardy. Three areas need this foundational approach: (1) meta-ethics – a new view of ethics as interpretive, social, naturally emergent and contested; a form of activism. (2) Applied: Applying this understanding to new issues and areas of journalistic work, plus guidelines on using social media and so on. (3) Transposing parochial notions of journalism into global forms. The greatest task of moral theory is to transform itself into an explicit and well-developed global ethics that challenges dominant forms of parochial ethics, from ethnocentricity to narrow forms of nationalism and political realism. In media ethics, we need to radically transform a nation-based approach to the norms of media into a global, interactive media ethics. In short, we should be radical in the ways of moral invention, envisaging a global ethics and a global media ethics for our interconnected world.⁸

For applied ethics, we need to provide guidelines that recognize differences among multiple media formats. Also, we need to focus on types of journalism that are not discussed or are underplayed by traditional media ethics. Earlier I said traditional ethics leaves us wondering what to say. A new mixed ethics would give us something to say

about the quandaries and complexities of today's news media. But, why isn't traditional media ethics enough, conceptually? Let me explain. Traditional media ethics is strong on abstract principles that cover all forms of journalism – such as acting independently and seeking the truth. But it is weak on specifying guidelines and protocols for different forms of media. Traditional codes of ethics stress objectivity and impartiality but say little about how such ideals apply to satirical journalism, opinion journalism, editorial cartoons, and advocacy reporting. Now add to this list social media, blogging, mobilizing media and so on. Ethicists are confronted with the age-old philosophical problem of unity and difference. A future media ethics should be unified by allegiance to general principles of truth and independence but it will have to develop an ethics of difference that allow forms of journalism to follow different protocols and norms. For example, I want the online editor and the investigative journalist to seek truth and to be free, but it seems ludicrous to demand that they work in the same way. So we face a huge conceptual problem: How do we allow new media writers to work in their own fashion yet not give up the ghost of ethics? Creating a consistent, ecumenical ethics is not going to be easy. This is the huge problem of integrated ethics. Next to the construction of a global ethic, it is one of the two great media ethics problems of our time.

So, imagine a media ethics of the future. What would it be like? It should consist of this:

Ethics of new media ecologies: Future media ethics will guide journalism according to alternate economic models, from nonprofit journalism to brand journalism.

Ethics of how to use new media: Future media ethics will say more useful things on the responsible use of new media, including what journalists should (or should not) say on their own web sites and when newsrooms should use material from citizens and the Internet.

Ethics of interpretation and opinion: The era of news objectivity as “just the facts” is dead and gone. Interpretive journalism grows. Ethicists need to fill this gap giving meaning to “informed commentary,” “insightful analysis,” and “good interpretation.”

Ethics of activism: Activist journalism will proliferate. But, when are journalists ‘agenda-driven activists’ and when are they ‘investigative journalists with a valid cause’? Rather than dismiss activist journalism, how can we think more subtly about opinion and advocational journalism?

Ethics of global democratic journalism: As I have said elsewhere, new thinking in ethics will need to reconstruct the role of journalism in global terms.

We need an ethics that responds to the evolution of media, yet insists that we use our freedom to publish in responsible ways that serve democracy.

If we do all of this, we will be truly radical.

Notes

1. Ronald Dworkin discusses normative interpretation in law, ethics, and art in *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) and in his more recent, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). The phrase “in the best light” is taken from these writings.
2. For interactive video experiments, see <http://graphicsweb.wsj.com/documents/prescribed/>
3. <http://projects.nytimes.com/watching-syrias-war>
4. See: <http://tech.fortune.cnn.com/2013/07/25/laurene-powell-jobs-backs-ambitious-media-site>.
5. For discussion of “best practices” for using Twitter and social media, e.g. the idea of “tweeting with integrity”, see www.journalismaccelerator.com

6. <http://newsroom.cisco.com>,
7. <http://www.redbull.com/us/en>
8. I explored the ethics of a global journalism in *Global Journalism Ethics* (Montreal, Que.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010) and *Global Media Ethics: Problems and Perspectives* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).