

## Introduction: Media Ethics in a Global Age

Media ethics, the study and application of the norms of journalism, should confront the most important questions that swirl around contemporary practice.

Today, these normative questions arise from a revolutionary change in journalism and information media in general: the evolution of a digital media that is global in reach, use, and impact. Journalism is now distributed along global, digital networks. Moreover, journalism is created by individuals who are not professional, mainstream journalists. The capacity to publish to a public is now in the hands of anyone with access to the Internet. Professional journalists, who once dominated the media sphere, now share the space with tweeters, bloggers, citizen journalists, and social media users around the world.

This revolution creates tensions within the ethics of media. Traditional principles, such as objectivity, and long-standing rules governing daily practice are questioned, or ignored by the new journalists and their online platforms. Notions of what journalism is, and is for – derived from a previous era of non-digital and non-global media – are redefined. Media ethics, once a relatively homogeneous set of norms espoused by mainstream professionals, threatens to fragment into rival sets of values espoused by different kinds of media practitioner.

Media ethics, therefore, confronts a difficult, fundamental question: What are the principles and practices that define responsible journalism in a digital, media world? This is the question that defines this book and organizes its chapters. The question can be divided into

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sub-questions: Do the routines and methods of professional journalism, such a pre-publication verification, apply to citizens who now create their own journalism online? What is the aim of journalism in a global public sphere? How should journalists use information on social media?

Answering these questions is difficult because our media ecology continues to evolve at a furious pace. The future of professional journalism in various forms, such as investigative journalism at newspapers, is cast in doubt as audiences migrate to online and newsroom budgets shrink. The search is on for new models of journalism, such as “not-for-profit” investigative newsrooms. Digital media gives rise to controversial practices, such as using software to effortlessly alter images. Journalists adopt new descriptions of themselves. They refer to themselves as “sherpas” who guide readers through the information maze; as “curators” of information; as “validators” of information; as “aggregators” of information and web sites around the world; and as “facilitators” of online dialogue. All communicators in this media universe work to the demands of a 24-hour news clock.

The expansion of journalism is altering the nature of ethical discourse. Professionals no longer control ethical discussion about proper media practice and responsible journalism. More and more citizens participate in discussions on media ethics. We are entering a period where citizens and citizen journalists will play a much larger role in articulating the “rules of the road” for responsible journalism.<sup>1</sup>

In sum, the media revolution is causing a simultaneous revolution in media ethics – the fifth revolution in media ethics since modern journalism began in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ward and Wasserman, “Open Ethics.”

<sup>2</sup> I describe the five revolutions in *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*. The five revolutions are: (1) the invention of journalism ethics by the seventeenth-century periodic press; (2) the fourth-estate ethics of newspapers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment public sphere; (3) the liberal ethics of the nineteenth-century press; (4) the professional ethics of the mass commercial press during the late 1800s and early 1900s; and (5) the current ethics of digital, global news media.

## What Is Ethics?

Before engaging these questions, we should remind ourselves what ethics is, and how it relates to ethics in media.

Ethics is inherently practical. It is the analysis, evaluation, and promotion of correct conduct and virtuous character in light of the best available principles. Ethics asks how we should live in goodness and in right relation with each other, a task that may require us to forego personal benefits, to carry out duties, or to endure persecution. This stress on the practical assures us that “the problems we have followed into the clouds are, even intellectually, genuine not spurious.”<sup>3</sup>

Our ethical principles are practical proposals on what rules we should follow so as to promote fair social cooperation. Ethical reasoning is essential to evaluate such proposals. We constantly reinterpret and balance principles so as to respond to new problems, new facts, new technology, and new social conditions. Even the boundaries of ethics change. In our time, ethics has come to include such issues as animal cruelty, violence against women, pollution of the environment, and the rights of gay and trans-gendered individuals. Ethical reflection is *normative reason in social practice*. Ethics is the never-completed project of inventing and critiquing norms that guide interaction, define roles, and justify institutions.

Ethics at its best is reflective engagement with major problems, in light of where we have been and where we hope to be tomorrow. Reflective engagement can occur in any area of society. For example, developments in genetic knowledge call for new ethical thinking in the sciences of life. Is it morally permissible to use genetic knowledge to “design” babies, or to force citizens to be tested for genes linked to debilitating diseases? Engagement involves the reinterpretation of norms, the invention of principles, and the development of new and responsible practices. This work of invention and reinterpretation gains urgency when basic principles come under question and when society, in whole or in part, transitions to a new era.

<sup>3</sup> Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, 4.

Ethics employs a form of reasoning that is impartial in attitude, makes the common good its goal, and appeals to moral principles. Self-interested or prudential reasoning – reasoning which determines what is in *my* self-interest – is not ethical reasoning. Ethical thinking requires impartial reasoning which considers what is good or right for all interested parties in a situation. Ethical reasoners do not allow their partialities or attachments to warp their judgements about what is just or good.

Ethics is typically divided into a theoretical and an applied part, although in reality both parts are involved in ethical thinking. Theoretical ethics refers to philosophical theories, such as realism and relativism. The theories ask about the meaning of “good” and “right” and they debate the status of ethical statements. Are ethical statements objective? Do they describe something real and external to the mind, such as moral facts? How do we justify ethical claims?

Applied ethics is less concerned about the meaning of good or right. It wants to know *what* things are good or right, and *what* are the ethical principles that should guide conduct? How do our ethical principles apply to concrete issues, from abortion to ending the life of a terminally ill patient? Applied ethics is the study of social practices, such as the principles of corporate governance, the ethics of scientific research, and the responsibilities of professional practice. Historically, applied ethics has been a debate between dominant approaches such as an ethic of utility (or utilitarianism), a deontic ethic of rights and duties, an ethic of virtue, and an ethic of community and care.

Where is media ethics on the map of ethics? Media ethics is a type of applied ethics. Media ethics is the analysis and application of the norms of a specific social practice, journalism. Media ethics is situated, practical engagement using the impartial reasoning that characterizes ethics. Also, like ethics in general, media ethics has three areas of concern: (1) the identification (and understanding) of principles appropriate to responsible journalism; (2) the critical application of principles to problems of practice; and (3) the development of virtuous character so journalists are disposed to follow the principles.

This engagement uses principles from ethical philosophy, such as utilitarianism. Moreover, the aims of journalism typically reflect some broader philosophical or political view of society. Democratic journalists, for example, view their role as contributing to an informed public, and tend to embrace the values of liberal democracy, such as freedom of expression and equality under the law.

### **Misinformation and Unreliable Sources**

Digital media has created a serious problem in one area of the public sphere. It is the growth, online, of misinformation and false reports (or, fake news). As a result, the public has difficulty is distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources. This is a problem not only for media ethicists and responsible journalists, but also for society at large.

The misinformation is not the result of error, or sloppy journalism. It is deliberate. Increasingly, partisan or intolerant political groups pollute the communication channels of the digital public sphere. Text and images containing “alternate” facts and fake science reach millions daily. The producers are racists, demagogues, conspiracy lovers, governments, and partisan news organizations. Web site trolls and social media campaigners attack the character of public figures. Thousands of racist sites exist globally and their number is growing. Governments, such as in France, spend millions of Euros on school programs to prevent terrorists from radicalizing their youth. “Populist” political leaders, from Hungary’s Viktor Orban to France’s Marine LePen, use the media to circulate divisive messages about minorities and immigrants. Meanwhile, there are less extreme forms of communication on social media every day contributing to a culture of meanness, where in-your-face ranting is admired as honesty.

New technology contributes to the spread of misinformation. Groups use “big data” computers and robotic computer programs to seek out citizens. Technology allows groups to fine-tune their online messages based on your location, the sites you visit, and the comments you post. There are “deep fake” videos that are difficult to detect as fake. For example, leaders are shown making incendiary statements which are

circulated during elections. These methods are used not only by individuals or political groups, but also by governments.

The result is what I call “communicative violence,” using media to wage “war” on others. The public sphere becomes toxic and unreasonable. Democracy struggles. A significant portion of this book is devoted to discussing such trends and what journalists and citizens can do to identify misinformation, and to detox their public sphere.

### The Structure of the Book

The first edition of this book appeared in 2011. Over the next decade, journalism changed so much that this second edition required significant alterations to the original structure and content of the book. One change is the focus on how media is evolving and how media ethics is being re-invented. In the first edition, the problems of what was then called “new media” – online bloggers and information web sites – were treated as emerging and additional topics. Today, online media is no longer “new media.” And, the problems are far from being additional. Online media is mainstream, used by countless citizens every day. Moreover, in recent years, social media has become a major platform for conversation, news, and opinion. In 2011, social media was not yet the elixir of social conversation that it is today, and many analysts did not foresee the rise of misinformation as a major media issue.

Therefore, this second edition of *Ethics and the Media* offers an entry point into the debate surrounding the use of digital, global media. The book is neither a textbook of cases nor a book on theory. It is an examination of the leading issues bringing together theory and practice. The book is shaped by the author’s perspective on how media ethics should evolve. I do not provide a neutral account of media ethics. I attempt to fairly present theories and viewpoints but, ultimately, I present my perspective on the issues and draw conclusions.

Chapter 1 provides a model for reasoning in media ethics, which will assist us in examining issues throughout the book. Chapter 2 explains the origin of media ethics, its professional era, and the subsequent fragmentation of media ethics. The chapter explores options for

disrupting and reconstructing media ethics. Chapter 3 analyses the relationship between journalism and democracy, and why news media need to be actively engaged with protecting democracy. Chapter 4 affirms the ideals of truth and objectivity, and shows how they can be used to discern fake news and unreliable sources. Chapter 5 discusses how media can minimize the harm caused by publication. Chapter 6 discusses how media should cover extremists and hate speech. Chapter 7 considers what journalists can do to detox their polluted public sphere. Chapter 8 discusses how media ethics is attempting to “go global,” developing aims and principles for global media.

## The Meaning of Media

Before we begin, we need to clarify the meaning of “media” in this book.

Media may refer to almost any sort of “material” or medium that facilitates the exchange of messages and meanings. For example, an artist may use ordinary objects as her media to create a pastiche. But a more popular use of “media” is to refer to various means of communication, from telephone and radio to television and the Internet.

Originally, people used “the press” to refer to the mainstream newspapers of the first half of the twentieth century, and then adopted “the media” as a broad moniker for both print and the new broadcast organizations. The media were the news media, i.e., major news organizations from the BBC to the *New York Times*. In the previous century, it was clear on who the media were. They were the professional news organizations. Few people were troubled by such questions as “Who is a journalist?” and “Is this journalism?” Journalists were easily identified. They were the reporters and editors who worked for professional news organizations.

However, as noted, citizens, who have no professional training in journalism and are not employed by traditional news media, publish news and commentary on public affairs. We talk about “social media.” Hence, notions of “media,” “journalism,” and “journalist” are now vague in meaning. “Media” refers to myriad forms of information exchange.

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In this book, “media” means “journalism.” Journalism is defined as the publication of news and commentary on matters of public interest and significance. Almost anyone can commit “acts of journalism” sporadically or regularly, ethically or unethically. A person is a journalist when engaged in such public activity. It does not matter if the person describes themselves as a journalist or not. What counts is whether they produce works of journalism. Media ethics refers to the norms that people should observe in doing journalism. Similarly, a person falls under the norms of media ethics whether they call themselves a journalist or not.

For stylistic variation, I use the pairs of terms, “media ethics” and “journalism ethics,” and “media” and “journalism,” interchangeably in the text.