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All is not relative: Essential Shared Values and the Press

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☐ *Reporters and editors share values. If there were no shared values essential to the practice of journalism, it would be impossible to distinguish a journalist from other mass communicators. The set of journalistic values provides the base for an argument that journalists are pluralists, not relativists.*

Reporters and editors are extraordinarily nonjudgmental of one another, particularly when they come together from various news organizations to discuss ethical problems.

Listen to a reporter tell his peers about a tough ethical call. He'll usually end the presentation by saying, "This is the decision I made; you might do something different." If you ask an editor to comment on a hypothetical situation, she's far more likely to say what *she* would do than to comment on whether the editor in the hypothetical acted correctly. Push any of them to judge whether some other journalist's decision was right or wrong and they'll deflect the question by raising the First Amendment. The press is free, they say. No one can dictate what we should or shouldn't do.

It would be easy to draw the erroneous conclusion that journalists are relativists — adherents to a philosophical theory that holds that there is no objective standard for judging right and wrong. However, I will argue here that journalists do hold moral standards by which they judge profes-

sional behavior. Indeed, without such standards, journalism would not be recognizable as a discreet industry.

Relativism questioned

Relativism is the ethical theory that states that "What is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another, even if the situations involved are similar" (Frankena, 1973, p. 109). What is 'right', within this theory, depends on the belief of the moral agent. (1) The relativist judges what is right or wrong from her point of view, but will not judge the adequacy of others' ethical perspectives or judgments. the relativist would say "What I call right is what's right for me. You decide for yourself what's right for you."

Within philosophical theories, relativism contrasts with absolutism — the belief that there is an objective standard for right and wrong. Absolutist theories judge the rightness of action by appeal to standards that are meant to hold across time, across cultures, and for all moral agents.

Consider what is might be like to



have a truly relativistic press.

A Tale of Relativism

Editor Ben called Reporter Janet into his office. "You lied in our news columns, Janet," said Ben, "You fabricated that 8-year-old drug addict." Janet readily agreed that Ben was right. "Well, I don't think we should mislead our readers, but if you think it's o.k., then that's fine with me," the editor said.

Later, Ben met with editors from other newspapers at an ASNE conference. He told them about the exchange he had with Janet. The editors listened attentively and finally one said, "Well, Ben, we do our best to publish accurate stories at my shop, but if you think it's o.k. to print lies, that's up to you." The other editors nodded in agreement.

Some time later, in early spring, one Pulitzer Prize judge stopped another. The first said, "Did you know that we gave a Pulitzer for a fabricated story?" The second answered, "Oh, the one about the 8-year-old drug addict? Great story, wasn't it? Remember, we're here to judge stories, not the ethical standards of the reporters."

Preposterous? Of course. No editor is going to allow reporters to decide for themselves whether or not to report the truth. The publication would no longer be a NEWSpaper. No group of editors will sit by while a news organization acts in ways that shake public trust. One questionable act shakes credibility throughout the industry. And, Pulitzer judges do judge ethical standards. Each time a reporter receives a Pulitzer, a Polk, or other jamor award, values as well as story or photo content are highlighted as being "the best in the business."

Members of particular professions share values. As John Dewey (1972) pointed out in *Experience and Education* and elsewhere, what separates the chemist from the safecracker or the surgeon from the butcher is not as much skills, but how the individual is

motivated to use those skills.

I call these implicit motivations the essential shared values of a profession. Professions are separated from one another by shared values, not technical skills. The difference between a journalist and a publicist is not the ability to research and write, but whether one is motivated to present "the company's line" or a dispassionate point of view. The essential shared values, though rarely articulated, provide standards that journalist and readers use for deciding what media behavior is acceptable, what behavior is not acceptable, and what behavior is laudatory — the ideal for which all journalists ought strive.

Essential shared values in journalism

First, U.S. journalists agree that, all things being equal, they should strive to publish news accounts that are accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete. Now, most, if not all, accounts fall far short of that standard, but that's the service U.S. journalism is attempting to provide. The first disagreement heard when journalists wrestle with ethical problems is whether or not the story in question is accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete.

The second value that journalists share is that, all things being equal, these accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete accounts should be published without hurting people. Again, that standard is often difficult to meet. Most ethical dilemmas parse out to a conflict between these two principles. Do we publish this story, knowing that someone is going to be badly hurt if we do?

The third, and often deciding value, is that journalists ought to give readers and viewers information that they need. If the story is accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete and if the story is important enough, then journalists will usually agree that it is justifiable to cause some harm through



the publication. Although some people disapproved of the newsgathering tactics Woodward and Bernstein used, no one would argue that the Watergate story should have been suppressed because it harmed Richard Nixon. However, an accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete story about a kidnapping in progress may be held to prevent harm to the victim because the readers don't *need* to have that information right now.

The essential shared values of journalism provide the criteria by which reporters and editors judge the adequacy of their actions and the adequacy of their peers' actions. By definition, a profession with essential shared values simply is not relativistic.

Essential shared values are the properties that separate one industry, trade, or profession from another. These values are shared in theory by practitioners, even if they are not always practiced. Essential shared values cannot be 'proven' through surveys or other nose-counting techniques. Empirical methods can do no more than provide approximate descriptions of what is the case. The claim for essential shared values, on the other hand, is universal, normative, and definitional.

The way to check out whether or not some value is essential to a field is to see what would happen if that essence were removed. Consider what the U.S. press might be like if these three values were not held by practitioners.

What if it were not the case that journalists strive to produce accounts that are accurate, balanced, relevant, and complete? Their products might be what we now refer to as press releases or advertisements or editorials, but they wouldn't be news stories. Part of what it means to produce a news story is that the product be researched and written through these motivations.

That is not to say that each news story perfectly exemplifies these values. On the contrary, it would be rare

to find a news story that met this ideal standard. Striving to produce news stories that are accurate, balanced, relevant and complete is a goal of journalistic practice, not the litmus test for whether or not something qualifies as a news story.

What would it be like if the U.S. press lacked the second essential shared value, that of striving to do its work without causing harm? This wouldn't necessarily yield a press that acted out of the motivation to cause harm, but simply one that didn't care if it did. Such an organization would lose reader and advertiser support. People are offended when they believe that a powerful institution has hurt an innocent individual and are not reluctant to express their dissatisfaction.⁽²⁾

Last, consider essential shared value #3: What if it were not the case that journalists believed that they should give readers and viewers what they need? Again, we would call the product something different from a news account. A mass market daily newspaper contains many things that aren't news, but there is a 'news hole' — a section devoted to providing people information that they need to know. Now, the journalist may often be wrong in their judgment of what people *need* to know, but is not possible for them to operate without that motivation and still produce a NEWS account.

The essential shared values of journalism are those values that give journalists a group identity. They are all necessary to the practice of journalism because they each show some part of what it means to be a journalist. In a similar fashion, practitioners in other types of mass communication have identifiable essential shared values.

The difference between relativism and pluralism

When journalists say, "This is right for me, but you have to make your own decision," they don't really mean that other journalists can do *anything* they



want. The expression is pluralistic, not relativistic. They are saying that, within the limits of essential values, there is room for variation. An absolute standard doesn't have to dictate a single, acceptable behavior. More often, an absolute standard clarifies what is absolutely not acceptable within the profession. For example, reasonable physicians may disagree about whether to treat a particular malady with surgery or with watchful waiting. However, their adherence to the essential shared values of their profession means that they will agree that bloodletting is not an appropriate medical response.

Most of the interesting cases in journalism, as in most professions, are borderline cases, lost in the grey area between harming a corrupt President and harming a kidnap victim. Is the discovery of a Presidential candidate's personal indiscretion important enough to publish, knowing that the publication is likely to harm his candidacy? Is the profile of a reluctant hero 'complete' if journalists grant his request to keep his homosexuality out of the story? Reasonable reporters and readers disagreed.

Decisions are difficult to reach on borderline cases. But, that difficulty should not lead to fatalistic relativism — the conclusion that there simply is no right answer. Finding some answers that are absolutely wrong is an important step in solving the problem.

The approach, instead, should be a

more careful analysis of the vague terms found in the profession's essential shared values. How can one decide if a story is important enough to be published despite the harm it causes? What makes a story *that* important? Since it's obvious that no story can be both complete and timely, what does it mean to strive for completeness in a daily publication or a nightly newscast? How can one judge balance in a story in which there are far more than two sides, or only one? Many of the ethical conflicts in journalism come down to a lack of clarity in how terms are used rather than real disagreement about how to judge right and wrong.

Conclusion

Once terms are clarified and the not acceptable alternatives are ruled out, other ethical theories are needed to decide among remaining conflicts between values, or conflicts between the essential shared values of journalism and the values of the community. Absolutist theories provide formulae to help journalists figure out what it means to act out of a sense of professional duty, or for the benefit of society, and how to respect, with equity, the rights of all individuals involved. A complete ethic for journalism is likely to contain a smattering of various ethical theories. Relativism is not one of them.

Notes

1. Within ethical relativism there are at least two types: individual relativism, which leaves decisions of rightness up to the moral agent, and cultural relativism, which leaves decisions of rightness up to the culture or society. While I believe that press systems, worldwide and throughout time, operate under particular universal standards — that is, one can judge the rightness of journalistic action cross culturally — the discussion of cultural relativism is beyond the scope of this essay.



Notes (cont.)

2. Examples of reader outrage over harm caused by what readers consider to be insensitive reporting abound. For example, a Bakersfield, California newspaper "received a bomb threat and more than 500 calls of protest from its readers" after publishing a picture of a family grieving over the body of a drowned child. (*News Media and the Law*, Summer, 1986, p. 2).

References

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