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FOUNDATIONS FOR NEWS MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY

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Ask any group of journalists or journalism educators to identify news media responsibilities and they will provide a seemingly contradictory list. Among other things, journalists are said to have responsibilities

- (1) to be honest and fair in their presentation of the news,
- (2) to speak for the downtrodden,
- (3) to get "the story" at all costs,
- (4) to serve as the audience's eyes and ears,
- (5) to be sensitive to the needs of individuals who become story subjects or sources,
- (6) to be a watchdog on government, and
- (7) to do whatever each journalist decides is right for him- or herself.

One way to work through these seeming contradictions is to look behind specific "shoulds" and consider how any obligations for the press can be justified. Here, I discuss some philosophical foundations for press action and illustrate that the obligations are not contradictory when one clarifies their foundations.

I argue that journalists have responsibilities that

- (1) are based on the function news media have in society,
- (2) follow from how specific news organizations define their roles within the communities they serve, and
- (3) follow from the individual journalist's own value system.

The word "responsibility" is used here in a conventional way—to

mean obligation. A person who does not meet a responsibility is morally blameworthy; that person has done something "wrong."

Describing an action as right or wrong is different from considering whether or not a person is called into account for the behavior. Indeed, some actions might be "wrong" whether the individual committing the action is ever discovered. Torture or murder of innocent persons might be examples of objectively "wrong" actions, at least in a *prima facie* sense. Whether or not one should be held accountable for failing to meet a responsibility, and the many extralegal ways that journalists are held accountable for their actions, are beyond the scope of this chapter.

The first two categories of responsibilities set limitations on what should be judged as acceptable behavior for journalists within a particular group. In the first category, for example, I discuss responsibilities that apply to all news purveyors in any society. From the second category, I derive responsibilities that limit acceptable behavior for U.S. journalists in particular. These two categories define universal principles—all journalists within the group are morally bound to behave in ways that conform to these principles.

The third category of responsibilities reflects limits that can be set only by the individual journalist. It follows from this addition of personal freedom of choice that there will be a plurality of morally permissible behaviors within the limitations set by the first two categories.

The combination I propose of binding limitations and a variety of acceptable behaviors within those limits is not contradictory. Law, for example, sets limits for permissible behavior, but individuals choose among a great variety of behaviors within that "permissible" scope. Decisions about whether or not to participate in organized religion, about whether or not to have children, about whether or not to vote or to participate in civic affairs exemplify some of the decisions that are based on an individual's own value system. Decisions about whether or not to lie to friends are based on individual morality although we are concurrently bound by law not to lie under oath or to the IRS.

CATEGORY I: RESPONSIBILITY OF MEDIA TO SOCIETY

Mass media have responsibility to society, no matter what society they may be operating in. Every mass communication system has

responsibility to the group of persons who depend on media for messages. This responsibility holds whether the media are privately or governmentally owned, whether or not the controlling news judgments are made within the news organization itself or by an outside agency.

Specifically, any communication organ in any society that is maintained to pass information to a broad and relatively undifferentiated audience of "citizens" has an institutional obligation to tell the readers/listeners what their society expects of them and to tell members of the audience what they can expect from society.¹ I am intentionally excluding narrow-scoped publications such as those written for a defined subculture (business publications, those intended for ethnic groups, political activists, or church members) and those publications, which by decree or custom, are supplementary rather than primary sources of information.²

However, assuming that the responsibility laid out for primary information givers is correct (it will be discussed in greater detail soon), how news media actually meet that responsibility may look different from society to society. Before we look specifically at the media, consider that a single guiding principle may look very different as it is interpreted in different situations. For example, assume for a moment that there were a guiding cross-cultural principle that adult children should care for their aging parents. In some cultures, that might mean nursing homes; in others, it might mean having many generations living in the same household; in still other cultures, it might mean that adult children have an obligation to arrange for an easy death for these no longer productive citizens. The same "universal" directive could look different under different circumstances.

In a similar sense, in very restrictive societies, media might well meet this responsibility without performing as we would expect the U.S. news media to act in our very permissive society. For example, the German press during World War II suppressed information concerning bombing missions within the country, but it did let the citizens know that specific cities could no longer be reached by train. This tightly controlled press concealed particulars about the war effort, but it did let people know that their ration coupons were worth less.

The responsibility of "letting readers/listeners know what they can expect from society and what society expects from them" has a broader interpretation in less restrictive cultures. The U.S. press perception of its "responsibility to society" is often coupled with a historically based value of giving the audience as much information as possible about the workings of their local, state, and federal governments.

U.S. media function in a society where citizens both expect and are expected to know what their government is doing. U.S. journalists agree that they have an obligation to provide this information whether they call it "serving as a watchdog on government," "representing the people," "educating the public," "serving the public's right to know," or merely "contributing information and opinions for the public discussion."

Editors and news directors do not agonize over whether or not to carry information about the presidential tax proposal. Although they may not discuss it in "ethical" terms, in some sense they know that they would be irresponsible if they did not provide that information for their audiences.

POWER AS A FOUNDATION FOR SOCIETAL OBLIGATION

I have provided examples of the media meeting their societal responsibility, and will now provide moral justification for why they should meet this responsibility as well. Telling members of the audience what society expects of them and what they can expect from their society is a very powerful function. News media should tell people what they need to know because media have the power to affect the lives of individuals and groups within society. Whether or not citizens like it, whether or not they accept uncritically what is provided by the media, they are dependent upon the news media for vital information.

The media do not constitute an elected power and, admittedly, few individual reporters or editors are ever straightforwardly asked if they wish to hold that power. Nevertheless, news media representatives cannot escape the responsibilities associated with power.

Power entails duties to recognize the dependency of other people and to use power in a judicious manner. Philosophers from Plato forward have argued that no matter how particular persons come to have power within society, they have an obligation to act in a way that is in the interest of the people whom they affect. For example, Plato (1981, 513-514, p. 126) was speaking directly to the mass communicators of his time when he said,

Ought we not then to set about treatment of the state and its citizens on this principle, with the idea of making citizens themselves as good as

possible? Without such a principle, as we discovered earlier, one can do no good; no other service to the state is of the slightest avail if those who are to acquire riches or authority over people or any other kind of power are not men of good will.

The most complete arguments for judicious use of power come from philosophers discussing those who govern in society. Of course, philosophers have not agreed throughout history just how these responsibilities should be played out. There is, however, agreement that institutions or people have power to affect the lives of individuals, and that fact entails obligations to use that power in a way that is in the interest of the people they affect.

Although speaking of government in his original piece, John Locke (1973, p. 224), for example, might have been arguing for the prosecution at a contemporary libel trial, pleading for more circumspect use of media power, when he wrote,

For when the people are made miserable, and find themselves exposed to the ill usage of arbitrary power, cry up their governors as much as you will for sons of Jupiter, let them be sacred and divine, descended or authorized from Heaven; give them out for whom or what you please, the same will happen. The people generally ill treated, and contrary to right, will be ready upon that occasion to ease themselves of a burden that sits heavy upon them.

Even John Stuart Mill, the champion for liberty of speech and the press, has arguments concerning powerful government that can easily be made analogous to the also powerful media. He was arguing that the press serves as a control over powerful government, but his warnings ought to be heeded when one considers mass media as powerful as well. He writes,

To decide what opinions shall be permitted and what prohibited, is to choose opinions for the people: since they cannot adopt opinions which are not suffered to be presented to their minds. Whoever chooses opinions for the people, possesses absolute control over their actions, and may wield them for his own purposes with perfect security. (Mill, 1976, pp. 148-149)

One may argue that the media constitute a less centralized power than government. Although this may be true on a U.S. national level, it is certainly not the case in the more than 90% of U.S. cities served locally by one mass information purveyor. There, the news organization does, indeed, decide "what opinions shall be permitted and what prohibited" through the making of "news" judgments. Editors and reporters decide what is important and relevant in a news story and what events and issues are worthy of public attention.

Most news organizations, those producing newspapers in particular, do provide some limited audience access through letters to the editor, guest editorials, and free-lance writing. However, that expression is, again, controlled by the news organization. I am not suggesting that most news organizations misuse their power; I am just establishing that they do, indeed, possess great power within society.

There is, of course, an essential difference between how that power is implicit in government and how it is implicit in mass media. Governments govern; media communicate. Yet, whatever the source or manner for institutional power, justice entails a utilitarian directive. Powerful institutions should contribute to the public good. They should not harm individuals or groups within society unless that is necessary for the larger good.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF CATEGORY I RESPONSIBILITIES

Within Category I, news media may be said to have obligations to provide information and to strive to cause no harm. Obviously, these two obligations may themselves come into conflict. Providing information may well cause irreparable harm to an individual. But, if the readers/viewers need that information to fulfill their societal expectations, as with information that would affect voting behavior, trust in local government, or understanding of the judicial process, then utilitarian precepts allow the harm of one in favor of the benefit of many.

The responsibilities that come from the function of media and society do not define a complete set of responsibilities for news media in U.S.

society. With only the responsibilities to tell readers/viewers what society expects from them and what they can expect from society, journalists might acceptably deceive both in their information gathering and writing. An additional foundation of responsibility is needed to ensure accuracy and fairness.

CATEGORY II: NEWS ORGANIZATIONS' RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITIES

In addition to the responsibilities that media have to society, news organizations incur obligations relevant to their moment in history, to the communities they serve, and to their professional colleagues. This second set of responsibilities is based on implicit and explicit promises made by the organization.

News organizations in the United States, at least, establish policies that govern behavior, letting the audience and advertisers know what they can expect and letting new employees know what is expected of them. This is done through formal written philosophies, through promotional material directed at audience or advertisers, or simply through day-to-day practice.

Communicating expectations that the news organization is willing to fulfill states promises of sorts. For example, when a news organization says that it offers "all the news that's fit to print," or "all you need to get through your busy day," the organization had better come through with just that.

Although the specific promises may vary slightly from community to community, there are some promises that are consistent throughout U.S. news organizations. For example, virtually all news organizations have promised to provide accurate accounts; they have promised not to lie to the audience. This promise is important to the local community and to a much larger audience as well. Travelers from Boston believe what they read in the Buffalo daily and the one in Boise as well because all U.S. news organizations share a promise to provide accurate accounts. It is because of this promise that news items serve as important documents for researchers. Through the promise made to provide accurate information, the news media serve to document the day's events both for current audiences and posterity.

There is a similar universal promise concerning information gathering. Journalists have an interest in keeping their information gathering above reproach. They owe it to the public trust, certainly, because it is likely that an audience would lose trust in an organization that is shown to be no less corrupt than those it exposes. But, perhaps more important, this is a promise that is owed to other journalists. Just as it is important that the wide U.S. audience trusts all specific news organizations to be as accurate as possible, it is important that the public trust in the profession of journalism be maintained. Information-gathering techniques that lessen public trust are parasitic on journalistic practice and on societal trust in general. If a single journalist or news organization acts in ways that lessen public trust, that journalist subjects all other U.S. journalists to suspicion.

A promise-based category of responsibility implies different obligations from one based on power held by the institutional media. The promise-based category obligates journalists to uphold the public trust in the journalistic craft and to give the audience what they have led readers or viewers to believe they will provide. News organizations have made moral contracts—promises—to provide accurate material of interest and importance.

The promise made by news organizations is essentially no different from the promise made by manufacturers who say that they will provide products that meet certain needs, or from promises made by a neighbor vowing to support another in civic action. Philosopher Charles Fried (1981, p. 8) explains the basis for and moral importance of promises:

It was a crucial moral discovery that free men [and women] may yet freely serve each others' purposes; the discovery that beyond the fear of reprisal or the hope of reciprocal favor, morality itself might be enlisted to assure not only that you respect me and mine but that you actively serve my purposes. When my confidence in your assistance derives from my conviction that you will do what is right (not just what is prudent), then I trust you and trust becomes a powerful tool for our working our mutual wills in the world. . . .

The device that gives trust its sharpest, most palpable form is promise. By promising we put in another man's [or woman's] hands a new power to accomplish his [or her] will, though only a moral power: What he [or she] sought to do alone he [or she] may now expect to do with our promised help, and to give him [or her] this new facility was our very purpose in promising. By promising, we transform a choice that was morally neutral into one that is morally compelled.

Editors and reporters sometimes have a hard time accepting that they have "morally compelled" promise-based responsibilities because they, individually and consciously, did not make any such explicit promises. However, in making the free choice to join an established news organization, journalists do implicitly accept the policies and standards of the company. Employees make contracts to do the company's work. Doing the company's work, for a journalist, means carrying out the promises that the news organization has made to the community.

Editors and reporters have an obligation to keep the promises that their news organization makes and to ensure that the organization is keeping its promises in a broad sense. News organizations have promised, in some way, to tell the audience what they will be interested in and to alert readers and viewers to items that they should know about. Some of these items may be clearly defined "events"—announcements of governmental budget, the hiring of a new school superintendent, the fire at a local factory—but other items of importance are "issues" rather than "events."

This is an area where many news organizations have failed to live up to their promise. Part of the obligation to tell readers and listeners about things they should know about includes informing them about developing issues and social conflicts before these become explosive events. It also means keeping important issues before the public after explosive events would otherwise be forgotten.

The covering of demonstrations by minority groups provides a good example of this issue/event problem, and is addressed in great detail in Chapter 7. There is no argument that the confrontations themselves constitute news, but when considering the need for public discussion and U.S. citizen input on social reform, the issues underlying the events are even more important. However, the issues themselves are rarely discussed in mass market news publications prior to an explosive event; they are often disregarded by journalists soon after public confrontation has ended. In failing to keep significant issues on the public agenda, new organizations are failing to keep an important promise.

THE TWO COMPLEMENTARY CATEGORIES OF RESPONSIBILITY

The second category of responsibility supplements the first. Based on the two categories, U.S. journalists are obligated to do the following:

- (1) tell people what they can expect from society and what society expects from them,
- (2) do so in a way that avoids causing unnecessary harm,
- (3) tell people what is and what should be of interest to them, and
- (4) do so in a way that will not lessen public trust in the profession of journalism.

Consider the responsibilities listed at the beginning of this essay, and it is clear that attempting to meet a variety of journalistic obligations does not present a paradox. Based on Category I responsibilities, journalists are obliged to be sensitive to the needs of individuals who become story subjects and sources, to serve as a watchdog on government, to get the story at all costs, and to be the eyes and ears for their audience. Based on the usual promises made by U.S. news organizations, journalists also have responsibilities to be honest and fair in their presentation, and to speak for the downtrodden (in that it is important for readers and viewers to know about the "downtrodden" of the community).

As will be discussed soon, individual journalists also have a complementary responsibility to do whatever they decide is right.

Of course, the responsibilities often appear to be in conflict with one another. Just as the responsibility to give readers information may compete with doing no harm, keeping promises may compete with the functional responsibilities. Taking a relatively easy case, news organizations routinely withhold information from their readers during kidnappings or other situations in which an individual's life is at stake. Certainly, the readers are interested in knowing as much as they can about the situation, but preventing harm to the victim does and should take precedence. The journalists set aside their promise to share accurate information with the audience in order to prevent harm. And, they do so knowing that reasonable members of the audience would understand and applaud their decision.

The kidnapping case demonstrates the priority of Category I responsibilities over those in Category II. When responsibilities from the two categories compete, those based on function and power have *prima facie* weight. The promise-based responsibilities are not reducible to those that are power-based, but news organizations could not make and carry out promises unless they were first meeting their functional responsibilities.

CATEGORY III: RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF

Clearly, the individual journalist is obligated to carry out the responsibilities discussed above. Reporters and editors implicitly agree to carry out these responsibilities by calling themselves journalists and taking jobs at established news organizations.

However, journalists are more than representatives of the media and more than representatives of specific news organizations. First, they are each autonomous moral agents, and thus responsible for their own actions. Illustrations abound to show that a person cannot hide from personal responsibility by attributing his or her action to a supervisor's directive. Individuals are morally blameworthy for their wrong actions even if they were following another's directions in performing the acts. "My editor told me to do it" is not justification for one's action; nor is, "That's just what journalists do."

Because individuals are blameworthy (and praiseworthy) for their actions, it is vital that journalists be consciously aware of their own moral beliefs. Individual value systems or beliefs can serve as a check on conventional "professional" dictates that serve no larger purpose for the community—on the journalistic norms that are not justifiable on the promise or power base. For example, "Never let your source see a news story prior to publication" is a journalistic convention operative in most U.S. newsrooms. Yet, more than one thoughtful journalist has set this convention aside when working on specific stories because they decide, in an autonomous fashion, that accuracy in a complex story or fairness to a source demands otherwise.

However, even if individuals are able to identify that their "gut" tells them that conventional wisdom is not acceptable in particular cases, they may not be able to articulate the just why they hold certain beliefs. In a pragmatic sense, a deep sense of self-knowledge is not necessary. The bases upon which individuals develop value systems are unique and complex combinations of religious beliefs, education, family and cultural norms, individual rationality, and consciously or unconsciously accepted conventions of the many subcultures in which one lives. The basic responsibility to self—what is important for autonomous moral agency—is an individual's ability to identify, express, and follow through on his or her convictions.

Individual autonomy is necessary for the moral health of any profession or group. A plurality of value systems among practitioners is acceptable and even preferred over uniform beliefs. Conventional

norms that define group behavior change only through friction. If members of a professional group shared exactly the same values, there would be no hope for improvement or growth, no questioning of normative attitudes or actions. Acceptable values change over time. For example, accepting free gifts and handouts, once considered bonuses for the job, is now grounds for being fired in most news organizations. Individual journalists decided that taking "freebies" compromised their ability to perform their jobs dispassionately.

Journalists also have a responsibility to the ideas of tolerance and a plurality that allow them to operate with autonomous values. This implies that journalists should welcome diverse approaches and not judge other journalists' actions against a personal belief system.

That is different, however, from saying that anything goes for journalists. Each autonomous moral agent must decide what is correct action for him- or herself, but those choices must be made within an understanding of the responsibilities inherent to the profession. Perhaps the first way that the obligation for journalists to "do whatever he or she decides is right" plays out is in the individual's career decision. Individuals choose to take on responsibilities associated with the profession in the same way that one chooses to become a member of a church, civic, or social group. Once on the job, the journalist operates autonomously, but within justifiable limitations. The proper criteria against which to judge individual journalistic actions are the responsibilities that are based on the industry's power and promises.

The point of this chapter has been to establish the foundations from which one can derive journalistic obligations. The power-based and promise-based foundations serve as bases from which to derive obligations that are essential for journalists to accept. These foundations also serve as criteria against which one can judge journalistic practices to determine which practices reflect professional obligations and which are merely norms.

With the addition of Category III, we see that journalists are independent and autonomous, operating as freely as the Constitution writers intended. Operating freely includes voluntarily embracing the responsibilities to society and community that are inherent in one's profession choice.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor George Reedy of Marquette University who formulated the institutional responsibility in these words in personal conversation in 1971.

2. I understand that there is a definitional problem here. Some may argue that citizens of any particular society necessarily share some worldview. It is impossible to escape the fact, for example, that "accept a plurality of world views" is, itself, a U.S. worldview. Where does one draw the line between a mass market newspaper, which is based on the assumption that the broad community audience has an understanding and some degree of acceptance of U.S. values, and the special interest publication that lets revisionist subscribers know how their particular political goals are being reached or undermined? I concede that that line is sometimes difficult to draw. However, for purposes of this discussion, I assume that, without having a clear definition, most individuals could quickly identify mass market news publications and radio and television news programs within other media offerings.

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