

JOURNALISTIC ETHIC: AN OVERVIEW CONCEPT

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A reporter's VDT/screen often shows favourable and unfavourable descriptions of his story and that particular story appears the next morning in the newspaper.

A TV news reader delivering his nightly newscast pauses on an item regarding the prime minister's speech to the crowd emphasizing the importance of national development.

A manager and his marketing officer invite a group of reporters to a special function hoping that in return their company's products will get a special coverage in the newspapers.

These actual instances and happenings portray and appear the next morning in the media posing ethical questions that must be answered.

Are there news values in the pictures and stories written about them? Do the readers really need the stories about that particular events? Are those reporters twisting and manipulating the stories? Sometimes, we are surprised that there are writers in the media projecting their proponents' image at any cost or projecting and promoting the products whose qualities are questionable.

Some other professional groups like doctors, lawyers, engineers to name a few are sacrificing their own interests to achieve professional ethics and also accountability, although they understand that the ethical code they have learnt is universal. They are policed by their own professional peers who have authority to cancel their practitioners' license when they depart from their path of righteousness.

In our country, not to mention other ASEAN countries, for a journalist, the ethical guideposts are vague, indistinct or non-existent. There may be nobody or authority to monitor the professional activities of the journalist. How well or how imperfectly the reporters subscribe to ethical standards depends upon what they understand through their limited knowledge.

Particularly in Malaysia, the recruitment of journalist is based on some basic qualifications at the upper tertiary education. This is comparable to the High School Certificate in the United States. Some media trainees own a diploma or degree in journalism and they are perhaps keen to know more about how to be more accountable in their jobs.

For those who possess experience in journalism would hardly believe that there is a continuous ethical process of erosion of accountability in the media industry. The question of right and wrong is not of any significant importance.

In our deliberate task searching for the context of meaningful explanation, we found that it is quite impossible to elaborate this topic as comprehensive as possible in such a short article. Knowing that it is not parochial in its nature, we take the shortest way of explanation, and perhaps this explanation would open up a new dimension of thought to untie the complexity of the subject matter.

The Nature of the Journalistic Profession - Vis-a-vis Objectivity

Professionally speaking, journalists seek to extricate themselves from the web of conscious values through objective reporting, avoiding implications or making judgements, and putting aside ideological values. Of course, in their struggle for ethical and objective reporting, many journalists are aware that they would never achieve total objectivity in reporting. The struggle for objectivity is in itself value laden, but journalists feel that they have to try to exclude values in the best possible way they can think of. Gans (1979) explained that the act of news gathering using journalistic methods are objective because like scientific methods, they are based on consensus. In the journalistic methods, facts gathered are based on credibility of the source and the reality of the events. The presentation of facts events is significant in journalistic reporting as compared to how the journalists feel towards or think about the event.

There are of course no clear cut guideline what is objective and what is not. The enduring values that are within the mind of the journalists are those derived from the journalists workplace through professional observations and practices. For instance, they report demonstration, riots and war because they are expected to deliver dramatic and action-oriented news with some human interests elements, not because they value order. But there are also other values that are derived from personal experience and background. What they understood from earlier childhood as normal happenings will be interpreted as normal in similar occurrence now. But these values do not intermingle with the enduring values as mentioned earlier. The values they built around professional journalistic environment are more prevalent as compared to personal values.

It is the enduring values that finally determine what should be printed and what should not; which particular news is given front page treatment and which are only suitable for the inside pages; and what kind of headlines and point sizes should be used.

Although journalists do have some feelings and personal opinions towards certain issues or events they are covering, most of the time they managed to place these personal values in the background or at the back of their mind. A situation may arise when they need to recall these personal values, which are the enduring values, and from there they will try to strike a balance. In other words, journalists writing about an event would not publish everything that they know about the event. They would try to highlight the important facts that best described the event. The outcome normally restrict news to facts and opinions that can be verified or attributed to credible sources.

Today the news media and journalists are getting weary of their credibility and accountability. Journalistic credibility is important for the journalists and their profession because it reflects ethical and responsible reporting which in the long run makes the media accountable and credible.

How do journalists maintain their standards in order to be credible? Basically, credibility comes with accurate news reporting supported by accredited source. Journalists feel that in order to be credible, what is needed is a set of principles based on the tenets of journalism that serve the public by seeking and reporting the closest possible truth about events of great concern and interest to the people. Responsible news people would also strive to collect information honestly and fairly as well as treating the people involved with compassion. Many journalists also feel that they should undertake the tasks of conscien-

tiously interpret and explain the news so that the news makes sense and could be comprehended by their readers. Ethically conscious journalists also feel that there is a need for voluntary recognition and acceptance of the responsibility to provide information that will not rip the social fabric and cause unrest among the people. Such recognition has become a way of life for Malaysian journalist who have to operate under a multi-ethnic and diverse social system.

In order to maintain responsible journalism, many ethicists suggested that journalists should have some kind of controls or a kind of institutionalized concept of responsibility that should be injected into the practice of journalism. Thus, journalists would have to succumb to governmental laws and professional sanctions, namely the ethical code for journalists, if they want to be acknowledged as responsible journalists. But even so, the question of responsible and ethical journalism is very relative; a press might be responsible to certain people in certain circumstances and to a certain degree. But to some groups they are not (Merrill, 1986:54).

In reporting news, journalists are aware that the news have various effects or implications, many of which cannot be anticipated or predicted. Journalists are entitled to choose stories and facts but they do not systematically predict story implications. At the conscious levels, journalists are able to control their own intentions or objectives in writing the news but they do not have control on the implications of the news which are normally determined by the people affected by the news. Of course, working journalists function within the constraints imposed on the profession and practices. In Malaysia, for instance, journalists would avoid writing and publishing news that would endanger or jeopardize national interest and security. They also would avoid news that would jeopardize their positions, organizations and those that would hinder their freedom to obtain information. Thus, news of this nature would be heavily censored, changed, 'killed' or totally ignored. This means that although they are not free from implications, it is within their power to minimize implications (Gans, 1979:189).

Another factor that might affect journalists' objectivity in reporting is their ideological values. Basically ideologists are not wanted by the news media because they might hinder the process of news selection, evaluation and production. As human beings and part of the social system, journalists do have ideological values that they uphold and help shape their image and personality. But most of the time these values remain in the subconscious because according to Gans, intermingling values in the news would cause protest from the government, management, advertisers and the audience. Christians (1986: 126) stated that by definition, as cultural beings, journalists share obligations together whether or not they have institutional affiliation or specific professional expertise. Journalists, like any other ordinary human beings, live in an ongoing relationship of accountability. The act of irresponsibility and violation of this relationship is inconceivable. Graham Haydon (Christians, 1986: 126) refers to this moral outlook as an 'ethics of responsibility', a view of 'virtue responsibility' that is required by all humans irrespective of roles, races, religions and color.

The Imperative of Philosophy

We could simply say that ethics is basically one of the most important branches of philosophy - the theory of right conduct which deals with all sorts of day-to-day decisions.

Particularly in journalism the universally construed concept of ethics lies on whether or not the media carry out their obligation with responsibility; how accurate the events are presented to the readers; and how far journalists separate factual and opinionated type of stories. This view undoubtedly are shared by the public as well.

From Plato and to the present day philosophers, the question of ethics has been hotly debated and has absorbed the attention of thoughtful persons in all cultures and religions. This has been the case because the question of right and wrong is so fundamental towards creating a lawful society.

In the traditional credo of journalism and perhaps till today, the media in the West and in our country as well are expected to produce the "truth" but it turns out the other way round in which the credibility of the mass media is gradually disappearing.

Since the advent of media technology and the rapid advancement of the mass media profession, journalists have become very independent and thus inspired by "the free market of ideas", the "freedom of the press", etc.etc., their activities transcending the boundary of ethical limitation. Whatever they produce, the question of ethics becomes of insignificant importance. The perplexing situation arises, however, when there is doubt among some journalists about their actions, they found that there is no clear-cut boundary of what is right and what is wrong? They follow whose rule and established by what authority? Fair in what context?

Since the media has become part of our culture, and journalistic duty is coherently touching our affairs (to some people), the moral obligation of journalists is under attack. No matter how severe the criticism is their duty must be carried out in the upright manner.

Now it is time for us to envisage the problems underlying the question of journalist ethics. Let us assume that when we talk about ethics, suddenly, it would strike on our mind about human - it is because ethics is synonymous with human behaviour - what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong, what is valid and what is invalid: these are revolved around the question of ethics. If we agree with this rational, we would also accept that no sanctions could possibly be imposed on the journalistic profession. Morality is a set of basic principles of conduct. They are general and self-regulated.

Philosophy may be the best option as a guiding light of actions for a journalist because it could inculcate the best possible decision for a journalist in facing the daily pressure in the newsroom. It may also help journalists to have a distinguishable perception at any time during the preliminary stage of their assignment. There may be allowances for their "inner commitment" and fidelity to enlighten their job in striving for objectivity.

Moral obligation for journalists has been discussed at great length by western thinkers like Immanuel Kant. Kant said that journalists have nothing extra special from other human beings. They perform their duty indistinctively from others and that their duty is done for its own sake. They are persons who do what is right because they think it will make them happier. A journalist's duty is to produce the "truth", not because the democratic system needs him to do as such, but by his or her own human nature; his moral obligation must function as a "rational man" properly.

Moral duty, as Kant perceived it, is synonymous with moral obligation - freely accepted. It is binding on the individual but it is not bound by any external forces. However, Kant's ideas are not ephemeral because today, such an ethical maxim "duty for duty's sake" is impracticable for the existing of various political and economic thoughts which are suppressing media activities and therefore journalists fail to carry out their moral duty

accordingly. The question of duty to whom and to what extent becomes not only the question of the journalists alone but it also becomes a matter of great concern for the government and those who own the media. Existentialism is another form of philosophical belief in which the main idea revolved around the journalist's personal commitment and his involvement of utilitarian motivation.

The satisfaction of the majority is essential in contributing towards moral obligation. Existentialists say, in effect that values are in the individual's choices; but although it rejects rules and propositions about duty, one will encounter a continuous commitment and universal emphasis on the essential value of "commitment" or "engagement" - also respect for personal integrity. One sure thing that the existentialist's concept of ethics adheres to "subjective truth". Circumstantial evidence moreover shows that no one would oblige the concept of 'duty for duty's sake'. However, it seems that this is a reasonable approach to ethics in the context of multi-faceted system of government.

Another philosophical perspective related to moral obligation is promulgated by Eric Fromm. Fromm views ethics as man's own responsibility towards man's existence. "Subjective truth", however, is considered obsolete because it is meaningless in searching for the "truth". "Subjectivism" contains full-of-value judgment and has no objective validity. In a practical sense, Fromm sees that ethical obligation should be universal and valid to and for all men. He says, "in humanistic ethics man himself is both the norm giver and the subject of the norm". He continues to argue that "freedom is the basic condition for morality. Our moral problem is man's indifference to himself."

The whole arguments have been postulated by various Western philosophers and the core of their argument circles around subjective and objective truth and this is confirmed in the voluminous arguments in Western thinking.

Moral obligation is not a two-value concept in which it's obvious that "objectivism" and "subjectivism" are responses to each other through our stimuli in quest of the "objective truth".

Until today, philosophers are unable to incorporate their ideas to reach a total agreement on solid moral philosophy. One has different sets of ideas approaching this subject. But their contribution towards moral development is undoubtedly leading toward geometrical progression. Since we accept that moral obligation of journalists must be performed accordingly for they have an important role in creating public opinion, to educate the masses and/or to entertain the public, therefore, this moral judgment has to be put on a pedestal for local journalists to aspire to and for the world to observe at large.

Model Of Decision - Conceptualization Process Of Ethics Formation

The general concept of ethics can be viewed at two different categories. One is an objective part of it and the other is that of a subjective part in which both parts have an equal importance in determining what is right and what is wrong in an individual choice. For further explanation please refer to the diagram.

The diagram represents our neuromuscular system (A, B and C) and area (C) divides our neuron into two parts or categories (A and B). Area (A) is representing the 'objective' part of our thinking and area (B) is representing the "subjective" or non-objective part of our thinking.

There is an interwoven process occurring between (A) and (B). It occurs in the form of sublimation or beyond ordinary human consciousness. This sublimation in which reaction between (A) and (B) has yielded a new dimension or pattern of human thinking (C) in that it is finally reflected in their decision and acts. It is represented in the solid black pattern.

This process tells us that in human thoughts, objective and subjective decisions are inevitable. The pattern in each area (A) and (B) is also indicating our tabula rasa or our neurobiological sense that is filled with subjective or objective thoughts that have been evaluated as to be recorded in our mind from outside our body (from A and B).

Normally, we tend to forget our past experiences or part computation and this is indicated by the remaining white little space in both areas. The blank little space in area (A) and (B) represents our neuro-biological sense that is empty waiting for the new experience or computation of external object from outside our body to fill those vacuum areas with events.

When the process of computing experience or events takes place in a person's mind, there will be a state of change in area B, where by the remaining white area in B changes to black dotted signs as shown in the diagram. Likewise, the remaining white area in A will also change, as shown by the grey tone in the diagram. Finally both patterns are mixed to form a solid black pattern (C) meaning that the assimilation of new experiences, knowledge, technical human skills and so on are taking place. Nevertheless, these elements are in a temporary state depending on how long they stay in one's memory. This means that some details of events are left out.

A and B represent the world outside our body, which comprises many individuals (human beings, plants, animals) family units, institutions i.e., government, semi-governmental, etc, etc. Under normal circumstances, these elements impose a norm as a major process of assimilation into A and B in processing, developing and forming human thoughts, (his way of life, principles, philosophy, ethics, behavior, etc). And at the same time the A and B are in the continuing process of formulating a social system based on the "consensus" societies, i.e. a system of law, marriage, welfare, voting, government, etc.

The decision of right and wrong, however is separated into two 'laws'. One 'law' is that established by the authority or custom/tradition of a nation e.g. obedience to established rules, etc. Thus, the conduct of a person (citizen) whether it is legally right is determined by justice in the courts under such rules.

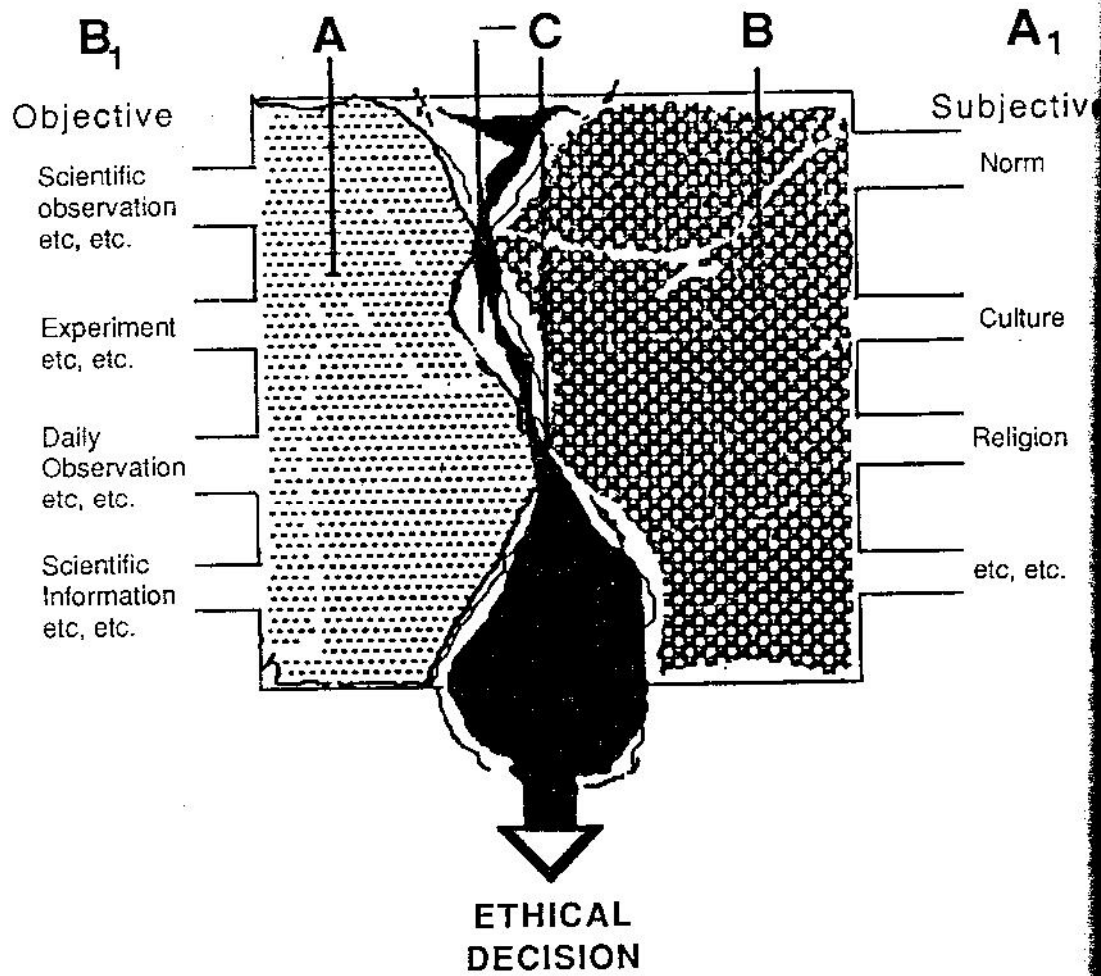
The other 'law' is the so-called Divine Law. The righteousness of an individual's conduct is not established by any legal authority or any legislation based on human consideration but it is stated in the religious teachings emphasizing on developing the ability of an individual to feel and think and be aware of oneself as a thinking being - to have a "conscience".

Conclusion

In earlier discussion we have touched on the importance of philosophy as a conduit to making decision and as a governing pattern of thoughts in making decisions. For instance, a journalist should always remember the word 'conscience' prior to making a decision wherein the word in itself is the product of philosophical thinking.

To sum up, all human decisions are based upon the interwoven process between (A)

Model of Decision - conceptualization
Process of Ethics Formation



and (B) that produces (C). As shown the decision conceptualization model. Therefore, one should bear in mind that there's n practical way of analyzing what's ethically right and what's ethically wrong in dealing with ethical problems of the news media because the assimilation of external norms is inevitable in the process of formulation our thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, if a journalist ought to be always right in making decision, his decision must be based on a multi-value system of judgment.

How do we do it?. Based on the work of Samuel Bois in *Exploration of Awareness* the one-value system of our decision is stated in the left-hand column and the two-value system on the right (see below):

LEFT

We use judgment terms, terms loaded with approval and disapproval, or

We use "either-or arguments, pass from one alternative to its extreme opposite, describe things in terms of black and white without any gray shadowing in between

We speak of the present situation as "just like" another one, of this person as "just like" so-and-so, of this problem as "just like" the one solved previously, or

We confuse facts that can be verified by anybody, and interpretations, opinions, and judgments that are exclusively our own, or

We quote authorities to uphold our viewpoints,

We interrupt, start talking before the

RIGHT

we use neutral terms, terms that are as free as possible from bias or slant.

we speak in terms of more-or-less, give consideration to degrees and shades of meaning, avoid talking about opposites.

we differentiate carefully between people, situations, and problems.

we distinguish between what is going on and what we feel or understand is going on.

we try to evaluate the situation on its own or merits.

we listen with genuine attention, wait for

other fellow is finished, we contradict with a quick "yes/but" our turn to speak, begin with something like "if this is what you mean, then....."

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