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Norms and the Network: Journalistic Ethics in a Shared Media Space

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A networked media environment fundamentally affects what journalists do and how they do it. In a network, all communicators and all communication are connected; the media space and control over what it contains are shared. Journalistic ethics codes and ethical guidelines have been constructed in a very different media space, one in which the journalist acts as a gate-keeper regulating the flow of information. In a network, however, information flows not only through journalists but also around them; relationships among contributors become more crucial and more complex. This chapter considers the effects of the network on journalistic norms. It starts with a look at ethical adaptations and highlights the growing importance of "transparency." After considering several other constructs that also are open to reinterpretation, it concludes with a case study highlighting how these ideas are playing out in a contemporary newsroom.

Journalists, embracing the internet with varying degrees of enthusiasm, have gradually adapted to characteristics of the medium. Many of those adaptations have involved work practices, in particular to accommodate delivery of multimedia content -- text, audio, video, and so on. Although this "convergence" involves some ethical issues,² it mostly requires adjustments in skills and techniques.

Other aspects of the medium lead to more explicit reconsideration of journalism ethics. The internet delivers information instantaneously, and there were concerns right from the start about effects of the need for speed on accuracy. Getting a story out fast and getting it right too often seemed mutually exclusive. Today, journalists are less bothered by this issue; they still want to get it right -- accuracy remains a central norm -- but they and their readers seem to have accepted that the first take need not be the final one. There is greater tolerance for an online story evolving so that new information simply replaces what, if anything, was wrong; depending on their nature, changes may or may not be flagged for readers.

But a medium that is faster and encompasses more modalities³ suggests differences only in degree from a newspaper or a television news show. The more fundamental difference involves the interconnected nature of a network. In their early days online, journalists adopted simple approaches to dealing with “interactivity,” most of them involving use of links. They turned their bylines into e-mail links, making themselves more accessible to internet readers. They added hyperlinks from stories to selected online documents or other source material, offering evidence to bolster an article’s veracity.

Those adaptations are fine as far as they go. But they are only baby steps toward carving out a role within a network, where both the media space and, ultimately, control over what that space contains are shared in a way quite unlike the experience of working for, say, a newspaper. In a network, no single message is discrete; all messages connect to each other in some way. Nor are media messages either finite or fixed. Instead, the product is fluid: constantly changing, always expandable, always able to be combined with something new and different.

Message producers and message consumers also are interchangeable and inextricably linked, and roles are far less rigidly defined than in a traditional environment. You may be a producer one minute and a consumer the next -- or, if you’re a good multitasker, both simultaneously. And in a network, you’re always connected to others who are occupying both roles.

So when it comes to ethics, the medium does matter. This it not because the internet changes human needs or human nature – it doesn’t – but because it changes how we humans interact. Ethics are all about interactions, the ways in which we deal with one another. Social life in the shared online world involves new types of relationships and connections, including some that pose challenges for media professionals.

Gate-Keeper Ethics and Relationship Ethics

For various forms of 20th century mass media, from the newspaper through cable television, the journalist performed a privileged task: deciding what information was to be disseminated to the public. Journalistic ethics -- as codified, interpreted and voluntarily adhered to by individual practitioners, organizations and institutions -- stem from this perspective of the journalist as gate-keeper. Professional norms are a way to articulate and safeguard the role. They identify responsibilities both to the people on the other side of the gate, the audience, and to other gate-keepers, including employers and colleagues. Journalists fulfill their ethical obligations by providing information of a particular kind (accurate, credible, fair, and so on) that has been gathered in a particular way (honestly and independently, for example).

In this perspective, the role is especially important because it is central to the broader civic good: the goal of self-government in a democracy. Journalists see themselves as fundamental to a democratic process that survives only through public access to reliable accounts of what is going on in the world. This is what Herb Gans calls the journalistic view of democracy,⁴ and what Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel call the journalist’s primary responsibility to provide information that citizens need to be free and self-governing.⁵ Without us, the sky falls -- democracy comes apart! The information is central to democracy, and the journalist is central to the information.

Without the ethical journalist, in this view, information may well include disinformation or misinformation -- and that is worse than none at all.

If you see yourself as the conduit through which the information necessary to democracy must pass, it is vital to have ethical principles to guide you in that role and to serve as your pledge that you will act in a certain way. If you are a gate-keeper, the commitment to seek and report truth -- the first principle in the U.S. Society of Professional Journalist's code and a universal principle in nearly all journalistic ethics codes around the democratic world⁶ -- is vital because it is your responsibility not to let the misinformation and disinformation through the gate. If you are the gate-keeper, it matters that you act independently in choosing, organizing, and disseminating that information because otherwise, we cannot believe what we are told, and our ability to act appropriately as citizens is therefore diminished.

In short, the underlying rationale for the ethics of the journalist in a traditional media universe both stems from and depends upon this traditional role and traditional view of that journalist as central to the flow of information.

When journalists move to a network, the ethical principles remain essentially the same -- but the rationale for them changes to one based on relationships.⁷ On the internet, where information of all kinds is ubiquitous, what people mainly need is some way to assess or judge its quality, which involves figuring out which information providers they can trust. Even relatively basic things such as links to source material are, in essence, a route to fostering trust. It's not so much about giving people more information, although that may be a side benefit. It's really about saying, "You can trust me because I'm providing support for what I'm telling you."

Of course, journalists ask for trust in the traditional news environment, too. But there, trust rests largely on their reputation or, more typically, the reputation of their employer as one that adheres to the norms guiding good journalism. The fact that media companies have owned the printing press for a long time is relied upon to suggest that they should be trusted to know what to do with it. And at the individual level, journalists simply ask readers to trust that they are being truthful, that they have been diligent and open-minded in gathering information, that they have captured the most important part of the story in the ten inches or two minutes allocated to it in today's media package. It is a lot to ask -- perhaps too much, as the steadily declining reputation of news media suggests.

In ethical terms, an emphasis on relationships has all sorts of implications. Truth-telling, for instance, is as important as ever, but not because the public will not get the truth unless the journalist provides it. Rather, it is important because telling the truth is, generally, the ethical thing to do in any relationship. Truth-telling is fundamental to trust,⁸ and trust is, again, fundamental to functional social exchanges. Without it -- if I have no confidence you are telling me the truth as best you know it -- I cannot have a viable relationship with you.

Similarly, fairness is important not just because it is the responsibility of a journalist to vet ideas in an even-handed fashion, not denying one side the opportunity to be heard even though, as a gate-keeper, she has that power. Instead, the ethical underpinnings of fairness are based on the expectation that if I treat you fairly, you will treat me fairly in turn. It is another relationship

norm, one in which the journalist is considered a participant in a more reciprocal process than that of information delivery.

The Collapse of Distance

The function of gate-keeper depends on a world in which the flow of information is linear, proceeding along a media-controlled conveyor belt with the journalist positioned between the origination point of news and its destination, the audience. But a network is inherently nonlinear: Information flows not only through journalists but also, continuously, around them. In this shared space, the multi-faceted process of doing journalism is more collaborative. Journalists still gather and disseminate information, but they are not the only ones who do. Nor are they the only ones who verify or make sense of that information. Those processes are distributed among members of a network, particularly one in which the necessary tools are free and freely available.

If the roles are shared, as well as the media space in which they are enacted, what if anything makes the journalist special? Why should you, dear reader, pay attention to what the journalist says at all? The time and talents that journalists bring to the tasks of gathering, verifying, and interpreting information do matter; those resources are important, and they are not universally or equally shared. But more crucial, in my view, are the ethical commitments journalists bring to those tasks – commitments to such principles as truth, fairness, independence, and importantly, accountability. Strong ethics are the hallmarks of journalism in a network.

Of course, these are hallmarks of journalism outside the network, as well. The problem is that fewer and fewer members of the audience -- people who also now have the ability to gather, process, and disseminate information -- seem to believe that journalists or the organizations that employ them honor these commitments. Moreover, those people have lots of alternatives. Journalists cannot afford to sit back and demand trust simply because they hold a particular occupational role or a key position in the information flow. As we have seen, the role is now shared, and the position is easily circumvented. Journalists must make their case – like everyone else – and in doing so, they must openly and explicitly demonstrate they are behaving ethically as both individuals and institutions.

This means becoming savvier about the way reputations are built and authority maintained in a constantly morphing network. Traditional media take their authority as a given, as something that comes along with the printing press or the broadcast transmitter. This stance too readily can be perceived as aloofness or even arrogance. Moreover, the notion of professional objectivity has largely blocked journalists from communicating anything about themselves, the work they do, or the rationale behind their decisions.

In a network, objectivity is inherently problematic. The concept, at least as journalists have defined and sought to enact it, involves metaphorically standing apart from the world on which the reporter reports.⁹ The journalist is one who observes but is not observed, who attends -- both in the sense of being physically present and the sense of paying attention -- but does not participate. Objectivity works in a world in which the end product itself reproduces the same roles: a newspaper or news broadcast that enables readers or viewers to look at the day's occurrences but not to directly engage in them.

In a digital media environment, in contrast, boundaries are difficult to sustain, whether they are among products, ideas, people, or social roles. Distances collapse online. Physical distance is erased by the immediacy with which any message can span the globe. Intellectual distance is erased by the intricate and extensive interconnections among all manner of information, and social distance by similar interconnections among all manner of people. Professional distance, such as that maintained by journalists through adherence to objectivity as a normative stance, is erased by the fact that the role of information provider is no longer limited to ‘professionals.’

This is not at all to suggest that journalists should cease to be observers or should become participants in the events they observe. We need, and will continue to need, people willing and able to serve as trustworthy eyes and ears in places we cannot be. We need, and will continue to need, people who can convey what they saw and heard from a perspective that bears in mind the interests of the public as a whole rather than the interests of a few of its members. In fact, those needs become arguably greater than ever in an information environment to which so many can and do contribute. The primary loyalty of any journalist, in any medium, is to the public.¹⁰

But in a digital media environment, that public no longer occupies a distinct space or role apart from the journalist's. We *all* are citizens of the network, and we all contribute to it. Serving today's public means conveying not just the “news” but also as much as possible about who and what went into creating it. In a network, journalists do themselves a disservice when they try to hide behind the newsroom wall or the less tangible but still real wall of professional objectivity. Those walls have become barriers to the relationships necessary for effective information sharing.

Opening the Gates

The linkages I have been describing, among people and among pieces of information, not only define a network but are crucial to the creation of value within it. The more links pointing to your site, for instance, the easier you will be for a search engine to find. The larger your social networking group, the more new people will want to join it. Standing apart from such a world is probably not feasible and certainly not desirable for the journalist. Such detachment leads to isolation, the one thing that has virtually no value in a network.

Journalists in this environment are necessarily closer to all sorts of people they have not felt close to before. The observers are also the observed, and many journalists have been startled by the scrutiny -- and by the fact that most of those doing the scrutinizing reject their claims of objectivity and instead see media professionals as active and self-interested participants in the construction of news. The emergence of blogs was especially eye-opening, with their emphasis on communication not just *to* but also *with* the public, not to mention their more-than-willingness to both attack and traverse the boundaries that journalists have erected over the past 150 years.

But bloggers have a more important message to deliver than the one that comes from nipping at the heels of irritated journalists: In a network, “transparency” trumps objectivity.¹¹ It becomes necessary to show what goes into the process of making news – and of making decisions about news. For instance, journalists must demonstrate – not just claim – that their synthesis of information is credible. They must show that they will be accountable for what they have

produced, that they will come back tomorrow to take responsibility for the information and their interpretation of it, and that they will admit and try to correct any errors.

These are not new ideas, of course; a need for accountability is formally recognized in many journalistic ethics codes. But it has been controversial. For one thing, practitioners worry about its potential conflict with autonomy: Transparency can weaken the authority of members of an occupation that once held relatively unchallenged jurisdiction over information delivery.¹² Moreover, the notion that personal views or other subjective considerations should not be factors in determining what goes in the day's news product is closely connected with, yes, that old gate-keeping role. The journalist who determines, without fear or favor, what passes through the gate must be (or appear to be) impartial and uninvolved. In theory, his own beliefs are irrelevant; a news nugget is published based on its merits, not on the journalist's personal views.

Whether that was ever exactly how the process worked is debatable. But certainly, that's not how information travels around a network, and it's not how people in a network see their relationships working. As we have seen, a network demands at least some degree of mutual trust -- and trust rests largely on openness. With some reluctance and not infrequent discomfort, journalists are beginning to accept this online zeitgeist and to figure out how to enact the concept of accountability in ways that fit. Two examples are through provision of greater evidentiary support for information and through increased personal disclosure.

In an online environment with its virtually unlimited news hole, journalists have a technically enabled capability to show where their information comes from and thus to demonstrate their own standards for assessing its importance and veracity. They can and should provide background about sources, expand the depth and breadth of stories, and solicit additional input and feedback from readers. The ability to link a story to anything else in the network means that story becomes part of a multi-sourced amalgamation of information about a topic.

Personal disclosure is harder for journalists. But following the lead of independent bloggers, journalists have established thousands of their own "j-blogs," which contribute to accountability in at least two ways. First, journalists are using them to explain the rationale behind the news, particularly of controversial editorial decisions. Second, journalists are increasingly using formats such as blogs to humanize the process of making news and to describe what it is like to be a reporter: to explain how a story was obtained, why it was pursued, and, particularly if the story involves human suffering, what the journalist felt while covering it.

Journalists thus have begun to expand their interpretive role to explain not just the story but also what goes into creating it. Blogs provide a vehicle for liberating them from the strictures of traditional journalistic formats and cultural norms. Journalists have found a way to tell a companion story, one that goes beyond providing information the public needs and comes closer to what you might tell your friend about that information -- including why you thought the story was worth telling and what doing so meant to you. This is another step toward establishing relationships with others in a network, not simply delivering information to a mass, anonymous civic entity called "the public." It also moves beyond saying "trust me, I'm the gate-keeper" to a more iterative approach to establishing credibility: "Here's why you should trust me. Here's why our relationship should be mutual and ongoing."

Credibility and Authority in the Network

Journalists seeking to demonstrate credibility in an interactive network also need to wrestle with changes in the nature of authority, as outlined briefly above. In a traditional media environment, ethical principles generally serve to underline and strengthen the authority of the news outlet, which typically “authorizes” its employees’ practices and products as journalists. The institution essentially acts as a gate-keeper for the gate-keeper: The individual journalist vets information through the gathering and writing process, and the institution then additionally vets the work of the individual through the processes of editing and, ultimately, of publishing.

The online information associated with traditional media, such as a newspaper website, may or may not go through the same stages. The previously mentioned emphasis on getting information out as quickly as possible is one reason why the traditional second level of gate-keeping, the editing process, may be rushed through or even bypassed, especially for breaking news.

That process also is typically bypassed for information generated by users, who commonly are asked to voluntarily adhere to a set of ethical guidelines posted on the site -- an approach that, again, is based on relationships and at least some degree of trust rather than gate-keeping. Content unique to the networked environment largely is left up to the community to vet, for instance by flagging items that are inaccurate, offensive, or otherwise problematic. Journalists and their employers have taken this hands-off approach mainly for legal rather than explicitly ethical reasons: If you oversee the content, you assume some degree of legal responsibility for it, and media organizations would rather not. But there also are ethical issues here related to a shared responsibility to create a space for civic discourse, as opposed to the provision of information within a space wholly controlled by the journalist and the media organization.

Another aspect of authority relates to how information is presented. In a traditional media environment, the daily product is aggregated into a concrete and finite information package. The newspaper, the magazine, the newscast – even the website, though it is neither concrete nor finite – all provide bundled material from a particular organization such as *The New York Times*. Online, however, users are less and less likely to see *Times* content as part of that institutionally assembled whole. Instead, they are increasingly apt to access information as a separate unit, such as a single story or even a single blog post about a story. People find and read isolated items through search engines, news aggregators and other personalizable tools rather than through the package provided by a newspaper or its website.

As the journalist’s work is more likely to be read independently of the work of her newsroom colleagues, individual reputation becomes increasingly important. So here, too, the relationship between journalist and reader takes center stage. True, the media brand remains closely connected to, and identified with, the ethics of those who work under its banner; you may choose to click on a particular story because it has been written by a *Times* reporter. But as connections are loosened between information and its institutional “home,” brands may over time become less important, or at least differently important, than they have been.

This shift toward greater individual authority and credibility is closely related to the notion of journalistic autonomy. American journalists, in particular, have fiercely protected their freedom from external oversight as a fundamental prerequisite to the credibility of a “Fourth Estate” able to report impartial truth. But in a network, no journalist is an island. A virtually infinite number of participants simultaneously serve as sources, audiences, and information providers -- and a considerable number of those people are challenging the journalist’s exclusive right to deem information credible or journalistic behavior ethical. Journalists find their autonomy challenged not so much by government – the threat they have guarded against for centuries -- but by the very citizens to whom they owe their primary loyalty.

Bloggers have taken to heart the self-appointed role as watchdogs of the watchdogs. Bloggers embody the idea that democratic power is essentially distributed and that the pursuit of truth works best as a collective enterprise. They personify the marketplace of ideas with a vengeance: Put it all out there, and the truth will emerge. For the first time, the capability to put it all out there actually exists.¹³ That is what happens when there are no gates and no gate-keepers.

But of course, it’s not just bloggers, who were merely pioneers among the digital natives coming of age along with participatory media forms and formats. The network enables – or, more accurately, demands -- engagement with people of diverse beliefs and backgrounds, which in turn challenges the tendency for journalists to see only professional peers as legitimate contributors of credible news.¹⁴ Moreover, as discussed above, no single message in this environment is discrete. No single messenger stands apart. The whole notion of autonomy becomes contested. Like objectivity, autonomy suggests at least some degree of isolation, and isolation in a network equates to irrelevance at best. Without connections, there essentially is no networked existence at all.

User-Generated Content and the *Guardian*

So far, this has all been almost wholly theoretical. How are real-life journalists negotiating this networked world? To begin to answer that question, I and a colleague, Ian Ashman, spent some time in late 2007 and early 2008 interviewing journalists at Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper and its associated website, guardian.co.uk. As media organizations open up their websites to contributions from some of the people in this relationship I’ve been talking about, what is the effect on how journalists think about normative issues and ideals?

The *Guardian* has an atypical ownership structure in this age of corporate media: The paper is owned by the Scott Trust, and its economic framework is an explicitly ethical one. The Trust was created in 1936 with the core purpose of preserving the financial and editorial independence of the newspaper and its related media outlets, now including the website. Under the Trust, part of the company’s mandate is to uphold a set of values articulated by former *Manchester Guardian* editor CP Scott on the paper’s 100th anniversary in 1921. “Comment is free, but facts are sacred,” Scott declared. Newspapers have “a moral as well as a material existence,” and “the voice of opponents no less than that of friends has as right to be heard.” In other words, one of the *Guardian*’s central roles is to provide a platform for a diversity of voices and viewpoints. Current editors even borrowed Scott’s ringing declaration in naming the opinion and commentary section of their website: Comment Is Free.

Our interviews with 11 primarily print and 22 primarily digital journalists highlighted the themes discussed in this chapter. For instance, journalists said that while they believed they took adequate steps to ensure what they wrote was credible, they could neither assess nor affect the credibility of what users provided. They worried about how that lack of oversight might reflect on them and the *Guardian*.

Issues of authority also were important. They agreed that users posed a challenge to journalistic authority but disagreed over whether that was a good or a bad thing. Some saw enormous vitality in the online debate and saw their own role as, increasingly, to enable or facilitate that debate rather than to provide definitive answers, as one editor said. Others weren't so sure, such as the editor who cited a need for "the expert journalist who can interrogate and understand and all those sorts of things in a way that the citizen reporter just can't."

Other challenges to journalistic authority are more direct: Users are in journalists' faces all the time, with everything from personal attacks to disagreement over opinions to disputes about facts. Personal attacks are both easiest and hardest to deal with. They are easiest because the optimal response was seen as ignoring them, but hardest because ignoring a personal attack takes a lot of self-restraint -- more, some journalists confessed, than they possessed.

Differences of opinion drew mixed reaction. Most journalists said they appreciated cogent -- and civilly expressed -- disagreement, which several said nudged them out of complacency. But they also said that the way the disagreement was expressed mattered. As another editor put it: "When users are just saying 'I think this is crap,' what can you say to that? 'Sorry, but I don't?'"

Challenges to factual statements -- to accuracy, that is -- generally were valued: Journalists said they were more careful about what they published because they knew if they got it wrong, they'd get slammed. In addition to being embarrassing, that of course would undermine their credibility. But there was concern, especially among a few veterans, that users were challenging what one reporter called basic assumptions -- facts journalists believe speak for themselves.¹⁵ Responding, they said, was tedious and time-consuming. In other words, users do not necessarily see the world in ways that journalists take for granted, which came as something of a shock.

Such challenges affect professional autonomy as well as authority. *Guardian* journalists relished what they saw as considerable independence; this was especially true for online staffers, who had fewer editors to get through en route to publication. But they had misgivings about the potential impact of hit logs and comment counts, and were wary about using that information to guide story judgment. More than wary, actually -- many said they abhorred the very idea of what one print writer called "traffic whoring." They also saw this issue in terms of safeguarding the *Guardian* brand. Celebrity gossip and weird animals are OK for the cheesy British tabloids, but not for the *Guardian* -- no matter how much usage they might generate. "You have to balance the desire for hits with what we think the paper should represent," an online editor said.

Guardian journalists saw accountability as something that differentiated them from users in important ways. For instance, they cited their willingness to publicly admit when they made a mistake, as well as to discuss and defend their ideas. They pointed out that unlike users,

journalists cannot be anonymous – and anonymity harms credibility, particularly by encouraging abusive behavior. “People feel licensed to say things, in content and style, that they wouldn’t own if publishing as themselves,” an editor explained.

More broadly, while many *Guardian* journalists had stories of fruitful engagement with users -- through formation of new community bonds, creation of a richer conversation about a topic, or enhancement of a particular story – they expressed dismay over the disturbingly confrontational nature of Comment Is Free. Several characterized it as blatantly sexist, as well as rude to the point of being abusive, hurtful, and upsetting. “You get really, really depreciative comments,” an online writer said. “Whatever kind of maxims you repeat to yourself about how anything good always has haters, it subconsciously works away.”

In the meantime, a strong sense seemed to be emerging that the best approach is a carrot rather than a stick. Journalists were learning to encourage the more cogent contributions rather than trying, futilely, to discourage the hostile ones. They were going into the threads and saying “good point” when they felt that was appropriate, responding more fully to what they saw as interesting ideas – and trying, as best they could and with varying degrees of success, to grit their teeth and ignore the irredeemably obnoxious.

All these responses suggest that developing new relationships is a process that takes time, patience, a lot of trial and error, and the growth of a thicker skin than many journalists now possess. The ethical transition from professional discourse to a far more personal one is a challenge, as journalists move from a gate-keeping role to one that entails engagement with an enormously diverse range of unseen but definitely not unheard people.

Conclusion

None of these ideas about online journalism ethics is radically new. Nor do I suggest that existing commitments to core journalistic norms are not every bit as valuable, if not more so, in this networked environment. On the contrary, I think they are at the heart of what journalists bring to an outrageously loud party, one with no cover charge and no one guarding the entryway. The underlying values are not just sound but crucial.

The way journalists think about and enact these values, however, needs to change to suit new and much closer relationships with the people who were once a relatively distant, distinct, and amorphous audience but who now share the communication space and control over what it contains. The task of the journalist once involved regulating the flow and content of information disseminated to the public. It no longer does. The nature of the network forces such control to be relinquished and replaced with the give-and-take of a more intimate, collaborative arrangement.

In this environment, more emphasis goes to openness and cooperation, while norms designed to erect and protect boundaries become a lot less useful if not downright detrimental. The cliché that the internet does not tolerate blockages is every bit as true in a social sense as in a technological one, as we have seen.

That reality is scary. It shoves journalists outside their comfort zone, and it does so rather rudely – figuratively and literally, as those at the *Guardian* are finding out. But as they also are finding out, there are ways to make the new relationships work to build trust, foster engagement, nurture collaboration, and create value. Ongoing interaction with users, which goes far beyond what journalists have encountered before, will continue to mean re-engagement with old ethics in new forms and new contexts.

ENDNOTES

1. Much of the material in this chapter has been adapted from previously published or forthcoming works. These include:

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