

# **A Study of Responsibility in Media Ethics**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the ethical responsibility raised in different fields of media. In democratic society, media organizations are generally assumed to play an important role. Media is the fourth pillar of a democratic country. When the media illustrate improperly, not only a particular group of people may be confused but the whole society may also do the same. Accordingly, the media should express their news as accurate as possible by following media ethics. The important responsibility of media is the common good of all people. The focal point of this paper is "why the role of responsibility plays an important role in media ethics" The tentative solution of this paper is that the role of responsibility in media can shape a healthy democratic society. This paper will contribute peace and harmony in society if the media can practice ethical and social responsibility. The research methods used are the descriptive and evaluative methods.

**Key words: media, journalist, responsibility, duty, ethical, social**

## **Introduction**

Generally, it is accepted that media organizations play an important role in democratic society and media is the fourth pillar of that society. Not only does it have to be transparent and unbiased but it also bears the responsibility of educating the masses and propagating reform in public opinion. It is also a platform for public discussion and exchange of opinions. It has the power to control and influence a nation's political discourse. In today's world, media plays a vital part in our lives by shaping our opinions and by guiding us in understanding the various discourses and events that take place. Accordingly, the media needs to follow media ethical codes.

People are morally responsible for what they do with the apparent fact that humans do not have free will because their actions are causally determined. In daily life, there are ethical decisions that impact the hundreds or thousands of people who watch, read, listen, and click on a media source.

Journalistic principles are often considered to be synonymous with ethical principles where the issues concerning professionalism are considered rather than more complex ethical values. In the newsroom of media outlets what defines media ethics is often redefined and conceptualized much more broadly as social responsibility, where the principles and values of the concept are used for sociological and legal reasoning.

Information in journalism is understood as a social good and not as a commodity, which means that journalists share responsibility for the information transmitted and is thus accountable not only to those controlling the media but ultimately to the public at large, including various social interests. The journalist's social responsibility requires that one will act under all circumstances in conformity with a personal ethical consciousness.

## **What Media Ethics Is**

Media ethics refers to the moral behavior of media people and the work they produce. Media ethics is a growing concern in the communications industry and among media critics and scholars. Some of media ethics come from outside critics, both individual and institutions, while some has come from internal sources who want to elevate and advance the work of

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newspapers, magazines, radio, television and cable, data bases, advertising agencies, public relation firms, and other media organization.

Media ethics is associated with journalistic ethics, probably because the moral behavior and conduct of journalists doing their work as news gatherers, editors, and disseminators of information for the larger society. In relation to news coverage it includes issues such as truth, impartiality, accuracy, equity, bias, privacy, reliable, balance and the public interests. Media ethics can also be regarded as a social responsibility.

Almost all democratic societies in the world have the right to freedom of expression and speech by citizens. This right is constitutionally protected in many countries. But exercising absolute freedom without any moral responsibility of resorting to reasonable restrictions is deleterious to social harmony. Therefore, all societies have certain ethical principles that control absolute freedom.

An important responsibility of media people is to tell the truth, and that means providing audiences with all the facts they discover. The most important responsibility of media people is their media products should not harm the community. Media associations should not report news story which is unbenefited to community even though the news is true. Therefore, they should follow not only their working ethical codes, which are set up by their own media organizations, but also ethical principles of great philosophers for larger benefits to society.

Different media obviously have different purpose, yet they would likely all want to be considered ethical. Media practice and profession, like teaching, medicine, and other services, have to take extreme caution in maintaining the highest moral principles so that they do not harm society. There are some ethical principles such as utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. These principles can universally help media people to make ethical decision making.

Utilitarianism, where the practical consequences of various policies are evaluated on the assumption that the right policy will be the one which results in the greatest happiness. This theory main development came from Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) who distinguished between an act and rule utilitarianism morality. Utilitarianism, with goal of maximizing the well-being of all people, implies an obligation to avoid harming people and to promote the beneficial conditions for human life. According to Mill, many obligations are general, allowing us to choose how and when to fulfill them. We ought to give to charity, for example, but we can choose how much to give to whom. Other, perfect obligations permit us no such choice and do correspond to other people's rights. We ought to pay the rent, for example, but have no choice about how much to pay or to whom.

Deontological ethics, notions based on 'rules' i.e. that there is an obligation to perform the 'right' action, regardless of actual consequences. Its most outstanding exponent is Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804). The categorical imperative declares an action to be objectively necessary in itself without reference to any purpose, i.e. without any other end.<sup>2</sup>

Virtue ethics, derived from Aristotle's and Confucius's notions, which asserts that the right action will be that chosen by a suitably 'virtuous' agent. According to Aristotle (BC 384 – BC 322), virtue lies at the mean between two extremes of excess and deficiency.<sup>3</sup> Confucius (BC 551- BC 479) said that the word *shu*: do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.<sup>4</sup> He asserts a negative version of the golden rule: do not do to others what we do not want done to ourselves.

### What Responsibility Is

Everyone has certain responsibilities: responsibilities in a family, at school, university, at work and so on. Each of us has more or less understands what responsibility is, what we

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bonevan. (2005). *Today Moral Issues*. New York: Mc Graw Hill companies. p-33

<sup>3</sup> Philip Pattern. (2008). *Media Ethics (issues @ cases)*. New York: Mc Graw Hill. p-8

<sup>4</sup> Mike W. Martine. (2007). *Everyday Morality*. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth. p-69



need it for, and why it is very important. Responsibility is one of the traits of our character, which means that a person is able to response for his actions, is able to take some duties and to face certain consequences of the actions that may occur. Oxford dictionary of philosophy defines responsibility as the extent of responsibility not just for oneself but for others is the central topic for political and ethical theory.<sup>5</sup> Generally, there are four kinds of responsibility: personal responsibility, moral responsibility, social responsibility and legal responsibility.

Personal responsibility is concerned with people taking individual accountability for their decisions, talking and actions, together with the outcomes they create and their impacts on others. It is about feeling that one is the author of one's own life, accountable for the life that is created and the impacts caused through one's decision, talking and action, both on oneself and on others.

The theory of moral responsibility is the status of morally deserving praise, blame, reward, or punishment for an act or omission, in accordance with one's moral obligations. Deciding what (if anything) counts as "morally obligatory" is a principal concern of ethics. Philosophers refer to people who have moral responsibility for an action as moral agents. Agents have the capability to reflect upon their situation, to form intentions about how they will act, and then to carry out that action. The notion of free will has become an important issue in the debate on whether individuals are ever morally responsible for their actions and, if so, in what sense.

Moral responsibility does not necessarily equate to legal responsibility. A person is legally responsible for an event when a legal system is liable to penalize that person for that event. The liability for an act and the obligation to repair any damage caused by that act; in criminal law, a person's mental capacity to understand and answer in court for her or his actions; guilt. Although it may often be the case that when a person is morally responsible for an act, they are also legally responsible for it, the two states do not always coincide.

Social responsibility is a fundamental ethical foundation. It means a particular organization or individual has ethical obligation to act for the benefit of society as well as to maintain a balance between the ecosystems and business activities. Social responsibility is important and plays a great role in every sphere of our life. So if we want to live in a prosperous and developing society, we all should be conscious not only about personal but also about social responsibility.

Every individual has a responsibility to consider and act for the benefits of society and individual. Each member of a community has his own responsibilities and duties towards himself and towards others which he has to fulfill to keep cooperative spirit and to keep a balance not only between people, but also between people and nature. If the particular action or decision is likely to negative impact on society or environment, then it can be noted as social irresponsibility. In dealing with media ethics, their responsibility is the common good of the whole world.

### **Responsibility in Print Media**

Print media is one of the oldest and basic forms of communication. It includes newspapers, weeklies, magazines, monthlies, banners & graphics, posters and other forms of printed material. Among them, newspaper is one of the chief avenues of contact with the world. The primary function of newspaper is to communicate to the human race what its member feel, do and think. The relative influence of the press may be declining; nevertheless, newspaper still plays very important role in our daily lives. They have sometimes exposed graft and corruption at great personal risk. They have also encouraged and helped to bring about various much needed social reforms.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Blackburn. (2008). *Oxford Dictionary of philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press. p-317



The First Amendment, protecting freedom of expression from abridgment by any law, guarantees to the people through their press a constitutional right, and thereby places on newspaper people a particular responsibility. Thus journalism demands of its practitioners not only industry and knowledge but also the pursuit of a standard of integrity proportionate to the journalist's singular obligation. To this end the American Society of Newspaper Editors sets forth these Statement of Principles for media people:

**Responsibility:** The right of a newspaper to attract and hold readers is restricted by nothing but considerations of public welfare. The use a newspaper makes of the share of public attention it gains serves to determine its sense of responsibility, which it shares with every member of its staff. A journalist who uses his power for any selfish or otherwise unworthy purpose is faithless to a high trust

**Freedom of the Press:** Freedom of the press is to be guarded as a vital right of mankind. It is the questionable right to discuss whatever is not explicitly forbidden by law, including the wisdom of any restrictive statute.

**Independence:** Freedom from all obligations except that of fidelity to the public interest is vital.

**Sincerity, Truthfulness and Accuracy:** Good faith with the reader is the foundation of all journalism worthy of the name.

**Impartiality:** Sound practice makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion. News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind.

**Fair Play:** A newspaper should not publish unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without opportunity given to the accused to be heard; right practice demands the giving of such opportunity in all cases of serious accusation outside judicial proceedings.

**Decency:** A newspaper cannot escape conviction of insincerity if while professing high moral purpose it supplies incentives to base conduct, such as are to be found in details of crime and vice, publication of which is not demonstrably for the general good."<sup>6</sup>

The responsibility of media is to respect ethical codes and fundamental principles of journalism. When journals report a story, they have to follow above principles. For instance, the case of pesticide industry and impact of pesticide on life of birds. Person A accuses person B that person B is a "paid liar" for the pesticide industry and person B has intentionally distorted the facts about the effects of certain pesticides on birds indigenous to the local area. Person B responds to accusations of person A were "utter nonsense" and "politically motivated". Person B said that he had never lied about the effects of pesticides on bird's life, and he had never been on the payroll of any pesticide manufacturer. In this case, a journalist reports this story with quotations of both person A's accusations and person B's responses.

The editor also thought this story was fair, accurate and balanced because it had quotations from both person A and B. Thus he decided to publish it. Although deciding whether who is right or who is wrong is not the responsibility of reporter, a responsibility best left to readers. In this case, the reporter had a responsibility to investigate the story more deeply and sought true facts; whether pesticides were really impacted on life of birds; why the birds died and why person B allowed gardeners to use pesticide in farming. In this case, journalist had to report what readers really wanted to know about comprehensive information rather than reporting about general facts. Journalists have responsibility for true, reliable and balanced story. Journalists have to follow those stated responsibilities to protect and strengthen the bond of mutual trust and respect between media and audiences.

### Responsibility in Broadcasting

Broadcasting is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the modern world. We can move from lecture hall to automobile and to our homes and still be part of a great unseen

<sup>6</sup> Harold H Titus. (1996). *Ethics for Today*. New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House (Pvt) Ltd pp-383-384



audience. The development of radio and television has been rapid; their power is tremendous. The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters is a trade association which represents a majority of the companies, including most of the larger ones, within the radio industry. So the association formulated the codes for broadcasting. These are:

**Public Trust:** Professional electronic journalists should recognize that their first obligation is to the public trust. Professional electronic journalists should: understand that any commitment other than service to the public undermines trust and credibility. The electronic journalist should recognize that service in the public interest creates an obligation to reflect the diversity of the community and guard against oversimplification of issues or events. They ought to provide a full range of information to enable the public to make enlightened decisions.

**Truth:** Professional electronic journalists should pursue truth aggressively and present the news accurately, in context, and as completely as possible. Professional electronic journalists should resist distortions that obscure the importance of events and clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by outsiders. Professional electronic journalists should not report anything known to be false and plagiarize. They should not manipulate images or sounds in any way that is misleading. They should not present images or sounds that are reenacted without informing the public.

**Fairness:** Professional electronic journalists should present the news fairly and impartially, placing primary value on significance and relevance. Professional electronic journalists should treat all subjects of news coverage with respect and dignity, showing particular compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Professional electronic journalists ought to exercise special care when children are involved in a story and give children greater privacy protection than adults. They present a diversity of expressions, opinions, and ideas in context and analytical reporting based on professional perspective, not personal bias. The journalists respect the right to a fair trial.

**Integrity:** Professional electronic journalists should present the news with integrity and decency, avoiding real or perceived conflicts of interest, and respect the dignity and intelligence of the audience as well as the subjects of news. Professional electronic journalists should identify sources whenever possible. Confidential sources should be used only when it is clearly in the public interest to gather or convey important information or when a person providing information might be harmed. The electronic journalist ought to clearly express label opinion and commentary. They must refrain from contacting participants in violent situations while the situation is in progress. They must not accept gifts, favors, or compensation from those who might seek to influence coverage. They should not engage in activities that may compromise their integrity or independence.

**Independence:** Professional electronic journalists should defend the independence of all journalists from those seeking influence or control over news content. Professional electronic journalists should gather and report news without fear or favor, and vigorously resist undue influence from any outside forces, including advertisers, sources, story subjects, powerful individuals, and special interest groups. The journalists ought to refuse to allow the interests of ownership or management to influence news judgment and content inappropriately. They can defend the rights of the free press for all journalists, recognizing that any professional or government licensing of journalists is a violation of that freedom.

**Accountability:** Professional electronic journalists should recognize that they are accountable for their actions to the public, the profession, and themselves. Professional electronic journalists should actively encourage adherence to these standards by all journalists



and their employers. They ought to respond to public concerns. They must investigate complaints and correct errors promptly and with as much prominence as the original report.<sup>7</sup>

Professional electronic journalists should operate as trustees of the public, seek the truth, report it fairly and with integrity and independence, and stand accountable for their actions. The only proper measure of its responsibility is the common good of the whole people. For example, the Boston Marathon Bombing story, it is clear that much harm was done by reporting this story.

The Boston Marathon Bombing was one of the most horrific incidents to occur in the United States. News of the bombings broke moments after the bombs had gone off. The initial story was told, but soon after, the question of who was responsible for this horrible incident became one in everyone's minds. The problem with wrongly reporting on the suspects of a story of this magnitude, is the consequences. The journalists were in the right by reporting this story, but they released stories with false information that changed the course of the lives of these wrongly accused.

The Boston Marathon bombings underlined the need for responsible, ethical journalism, especially religion journalism. It also called attention to those we might call "citizen journalists," the users of Twitter and Reddit and other social media, who relayed accounts of the bombing and its aftermath \_ some of it was wrong and some of it was falsely accusing people, who had nothing to do with the bombings. The fundamental principles of the media's responsibility are to fulfill public interest, which also lies at the basic responsibilities. To practice social responsibility, media people should exercise the activities which can develop advantages of public good, at the same time, need to avoid the activities which produce negative impacts for society and environment. To achieve peaceful and developed society, the media must follow and practice essential ethical and social responsibilities.

### **Responsibility in Visual Journalism**

Visual journalists operate as trustees of the public. Their primary role is to report visually on the significant events and varied viewpoints in our common world. Their primary goal is the faithful and comprehensive depiction of the subject at hand. As visual journalists, they have the responsibility to document society and to preserve its history through images.

Once, the most instantaneous ethical decisions in photography was: "Shoot or do not shoot?" Today the question has added layers: "Post or do not post?" Or: "Go live or not?" Or: "Do one use this amateur video?" Nowadays, the general rule for most journalists is "shoot". Otherwise editors cannot made decision concerning photos that do not exist.

Responsibility of visual journalist is to well inform people and remind people in a way that is appropriate to the event. Photographic and video images can reveal great truths, expose wrongdoing and neglect, inspire hope and understanding and connect people around the globe through the language of visual understanding. Photographs can also cause great harm if they are callously intrusive or are manipulated. Therefore, the National Press Photographers Association sets forth the following responsibilities:

1. The practice of photojournalism, both as a science and art, is worthy of the very best thought and effort of those who enter into it as a profession.
2. Photojournalism affords an opportunity to serve the public that is equaled by few other vocations and all members of the profession should strive by example and influence to maintain high standards of ethical conduct free of mercenary considerations of any kind.
3. It is the individual responsibility of every photojournalist at all times to strive for pictures that report truthfully, honestly and objectively.

<sup>7</sup> Professional Codes of Ethics, accessed 9 Sept 2019, <<https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~rcollins/431ethics/codes.htm>>



4. Business promotion in its many forms is essential, but untrue statements of any nature are not worthy of a professional photojournalist and we severely condemn any such practice.
5. It is our duty to encourage and assist all members of our profession, individually and collectively, so that the quality of photojournalism may constantly be raised to higher standards.
6. It is the duty of every photojournalist to work to preserve all freedom-of-the-press rights recognized by law and to work to protect and expand freedom-of-access to all sources of news and visual information.
7. Our standards of business dealings, ambitions and relations shall have in them a note of sympathy for our common humanity and shall always require us to take into consideration our highest duties as members of society. In every situation in our business life, in every responsibility that comes before us, our chief thought shall be to fulfill that responsibility and discharge that duty so that when each of us is finished we shall have endeavored to lift the level of human ideals and achievement higher than we found it."<sup>8</sup>

The United States National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) is a professional society that acknowledges concern for the public's right to freedom in searching for truth in a photograph and the public's right to be informed about the events that occur in the world. Since the same ethical approaches are applied to photojournalism as to other journalism forms, photographs should illustrate news in an object manner to keep the public accurately informed.

Sometimes photojournalists face dilemma situation when they take tragedy scenes. Photojournalists who have responsibility to decide whether and how to take photographs of a tragedy is wrestling with dilemma of treating every subject as an end and not merely a means to an end. Most people agree that powerful images can play an important role but journalists need to consider privacy of other people. Therefore, journalists need to think whether to publish a certain photo or not. In an essay of "The End Can Justify the Means\_ But Rarely," by Warren Bovee offers some questions for photojournalists to find a solution when they face dilemma situation:

- "1. Are the means truly morally evil or merely distasteful, unpopular, etc?
2. Is the end a real good or sometime that merely appears to be good?
3. Is it probable that the means will achieve the end?
4. Is the same good possible using other means? Is the bad means being used as a shortcut to a good end when other methods would do?
5. Is the good end clearly greater than any evil means used to attain it?
6. Will the means used to achieve the end withstand the test of publicity?"<sup>9</sup>

These questions may support some journalists who are wrestling with ethical dilemma. When confronted with situations in which the proper action is not clear, seek the counsel of those who exhibit the highest standards of the profession.

Visual journalists should continuously study their craft and ethics that will guide them. The visual journalists should operate under their version of Kant's categorical imperative: "Do not deceive a trusting audience with manipulated reality and do not offend an unsuspecting audience with one's gritty reality."<sup>10</sup> Visual journalists are dealing with a trust that readers and viewers have placed in them. If readers and viewers don't trust on certain story or image, journalists will be difficult to get the trust from audiences. In order to gain respect, credibility and trust from audiences, journalists and media have to follow their ethical responsibilities in using accurate and reliable information and image.

### Conclusion

It may be concluded that, in the present day, most of the people believe that communication is very important as they live in social groups. Without it, or with bad or

<sup>8</sup> National Press Photographers Association: Codes of Ethics, accessed 9 Sept 2019, <<https://members.newsleaders.org/resources-ethnics-nppa>

<sup>9</sup> Pattern, Philip. (2008). *Media Ethics (issues @ cases)*. New York: Mc Graw Hill. p.208

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.214



wrong communication, society may be messed up. Media can be a dangerous weapon as it can harm people far and near. So, one of the most important responsibilities of media is to express suitable information for their society.

Everyone has knowledge about responsibility. We have known that there are responsible people and others are irresponsible. Responsibility, itself, has a sign of having good character. Action of responsibility is the vital role in media around the world today.

A biased and narrow minded journalism can cause harm to society, inter-ethnic relations and the world. Biased and propaganda reports may incite ethnic and religious groups in a region to attack each other. A narrow-minded, ultra patriotic news reports can stampede populations into war. Thus, the reports need to be accurate and balanced, as judged from ethical perspective. Moreover, media with corporate responsibility needs to raise issues for their people understanding the global problems of poverty, environmental degradation, global warming, health education, human rights abuses, international relations, and so on.

When a doctor makes a wrong decision, a patient will die. An engineer makes a mistake, hundreds of people may face suffering. When media illustrate improperly, not only a particular group of people may be confused but the whole society may also do the same. Therefore, the media should express their news as accurately as possible by following media ethics. They should follow their ethical codes as their responsibility when they report their news to the public.

Regarding to fulfill public interests, all media including broadcasting and print media have an ethical responsibility to promote public interests and deliver a positive contribution to the society. The role of responsibility plays very crucial role in media ethics because unless media report properly, the society may be havoc and violence. One of the important responsibilities of media is to help different interest groups understand each other better.

In a society, everybody has to follow ethical responsibility and to respect ethical codes for harmony and better society including media. In our personal life, we might feel the greatest sense of ethical responsibility to our family and close friends. But the media also have ethical responsibilities to many people, who count on them to report the right thing. Responsibilities make everyone ethically or socially accountable within the greater society. So the role of responsibility in media plays a vital role in shaping a healthy democratic society. If the media take full ethical and social responsibility, people will trust the media. As consequences, society will be relatively peaceful. Then happiness and harmony will be followed.

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10. <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

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