The background of the entire page is a dense, overlapping collage of various newspaper clippings and headlines. Some legible headlines include "ENGLAND", "GRIFFITHS", "POUR QUI", "ROULE", "Bee know", "CHANNEL FIVE", "DISASTER", "GOING!", "TANAKURA", "ISLAND", "TOP", "MON", "la Parole", and "UNIVERSITY".

Media Ethics & Accountability Systems

Claude-Jean Bertrand

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Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

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Claude-Jean Bertrand

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2000 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 99-056519

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bertrand, Claude Jean

Media ethics and accountability systems / by Claude-Jean Bertrand.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-56000-420-7

1. Mass media—Moral and ethical aspects. I. Title.

P94 .B47 1999

175—dc21

99-056519

ISBN 13: 978-1-56000-420-2 (hbk)

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Introduction

About a century ago, a huge scandal was exposed in France: the French had lent billions of dollars to the Czarist State and faced little probability of ever being reimbursed. At the time, “any resistance to new loans was fought down by the press, which, in cahoots with the banks, had grown used to a very profitable blackmail.”¹ Much closer in time, in 1990, after the news director of a major French television network had allowed opponents of the government, in a country where the conglomerate that owned the network has big construction projects, on the air, the conglomerate president was heard to say: “She must become aware of the interests of a large industrial group like ours. If she doesn’t, then the door is wide open: let her operate elsewhere.” Such an incident may escape the public. What the public does notice is that the anchorman of the most watched newscast still held his job in 1999, eight years after it was revealed that he had fabricated an interview with Fidel Castro by inserting questions into a film shot during a press conference. And five years after he was involved in the investigation of a major crook for having accepted important gifts from him.

No wonder opinion polls show a distrust of media among the public and a willingness to let their freedom be curtailed;² less than a third of French people believe journalists are independent. “Americans are coming to the nearly unanimous conclusion that the press is biased, that powerful people and organizations can kill or steer news stories.”³ Everywhere, the various groups within the public express strong discontent towards the entertainment provided by the media.

-
1. In *L'Essor industriel et l'impérialisme colonial*, by M. Baumont, Paris, PUF, 1937 - p.196.
 2. as shown by the annual survey published by the daily *La Croix* and the weekly *Télérama* since 1987.
 3. Editorial on an ASNE (American Society of Newspaper Editors) newspaper credibility survey of 3 000 U.S. adults—in *Editor & Publisher*, December 28, 1998, p. 12.

2 Media Ethics and Accountability Systems

Paradoxically, the media are accused of every sin at a time when they have never been better. To realize the progress, it is enough to flip through a few dailies from the nineteenth century, to glimpse a few television programs from the 1950s—or to read the diatribes of contemporary critics. The media are certainly better today, but still mediocre. And, mainly, while in the old days, most people could do without media, today, even in rural regions, the need is felt not just of media but of good media. Their improvement is not just a desirable change: the fate of mankind is predicated on it. Only democracy can insure the survival of human civilization and there can be no democracy without well-informed citizens and there cannot be such citizens without quality media.

Such a statement may seem exaggerated, but consider the former USSR where, between 1917 and the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of ancient books and works of art were destroyed; where vast regions were terminally polluted, where tens of millions of people were killed—because the soviet media could not, would not, expose and protest.

As the media do not fulfill their functions well enough, a crucial issue in any society can be summed up in one question: how can the media be improved?

Media

They should be considered all together as an industry, as a public service and as a political institution. Actually not all media enjoy that triple nature: for one thing, the new technology makes it possible for little mom-and-pop media to make a come back. Besides, a part of media products has nothing to do with public service, like supermarket tabloids, for instance. Lastly, many media, like reviews serving trades and professions, play no part in political life. Nevertheless, the media which enlightened citizens care about are the carriers of general news: those nowadays cannot shed any of the three combined features.

Conflict of Liberty

The result is a fundamental conflict between freedom of enterprise and freedom of speech. In the eyes of media entrepreneurs (and of advertisers), news and entertainment is a material with which to exploit a natural resource, consumers: and they strive to maintain a state of society which they find profitable. On the other hand, for citizens,

news-and-entertainment is a tool they wish to use in their search for happiness, which they cannot attain without some changes in the status quo.

There is no easy way out of that dilemma. For many years, more than half the nations on earth did adopt one of two solutions. Both consist in eliminating one of the antagonists. Fascist dictatorships suppress freedom of speech, usually without touching ownership of media. Communist regimes suppress free enterprise and claim to maintain free speech. The effect is the same in both cases: the crippled media become a means to cretinize and indoctrinate.

One option might be to give total (political) freedom to the media industry. The termination of the State monopoly over European broadcasting, and of government control, has greatly improved democracy on the Old Continent and the development of media since the early 1980s. But the growing commercialism of media in the twentieth century and the concentration of ownership cannot very well coexist with media pluralism. "Conglomeratization" is not a favorable context for the needed independence of media. If freedom was total, the media would most probably prostitute themselves in both the news sector and the realm of entertainment. Europeans fear what they observe in the U.S., where nearly all media are commercial and regulation is minimal.⁴ Eugene Roberts, the highly respected U.S. newspaper editor, deplors that "newspapers, with a few exceptions, concentrate on increasing profits to please share-holders."⁵ In the U.S., a newspaper group can boast a 25 percent profit (Gannett)—while a television station can reach 50 percent.

The purpose of media cannot be just to make money. Nor just to be free: freedom is necessary but not sufficient. The goal for media is to serve all citizens well. Everywhere in the West, private media have for a long time enjoyed political freedom—yet they have quite often provided poor services. For instance, Britain's BBC is, constitutionally, less free than ABC in the U.S. but it has always served its listeners and viewers far better.⁶

4. see Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, Boston, Beacon, 1983 - 5th ed. 1997; and also Erik Barnouw & al., *Conglomerates and the Media*, New York, The New Press, 1997.

5. quoted in *Editor & Publisher*, 24/2/1996.

6. See Willian Baker & George Dessart, *Down the Tube: An Inside Account of the Failure of American Television*, New York, Basic Books, 1998.

4 Media Ethics and Accountability Systems

So, should all media, on the contrary, be set under State control? The experience endured in the twentieth century of both communism and fascism has but reenforced the traditional distrust of people towards government. Quite rightly, they fear what could be a total manipulation of news and entertainment.

Clearly, total media freedom would be intolerable (can anyone be allowed to issue calls to murder or racial persecution?)—and media cannot be entrusted to the State. In every democracy in the world, there is agreement over the fact that media must be free but cannot be entirely free. The problem of balance between freedom and control is not a new one: John Adams, president of the U.S. from 1797 to 1801, wrote to a friend in 1815:

“If ever there is to be an improvement in the fate of mankind, philosophers, theologians, lawmakers, politicians and moralists will find that the regulation of the press is the most difficult, most dangerous and most important they will have to solve.”⁷

In Anglo-Saxon countries generally, too much confidence is lodged in “the market” as a guarantee of good media service—while in Latin countries too much trust is placed in the Law. Both are indispensable and dangerous. Without rejecting either, we need to find a supplementary instrument. That tool could be media ethics and accountability systems.

Media Ethics

It consists in a body of principles and rules, fashioned by the profession, preferably in cooperation with media users, in order that media can better serve most, if not all, groups within the population. Journalism is special among democratic institutions in that its status is not based on a social contract, a delegation of power by the people, either through an election or appointment dependent on degrees—or again through laws that would set norms of behavior for it. So to keep their prestige and independence, media need a deep awareness of their primary responsibility to provide a good public service.

Their ethics does not participate of legislation—or even of morality, in the narrow sense of the term. It is not a question of being honest or courteous but to assume a major social function. Certainly, quality

7. Letter to John Lloyd dated 11 February 1815.

service is not easy to define, except in a negative way. What is excluded, for example, is limiting a regional daily to a bunch of zoned pages filled with little local events, as in the French provincial press—or again, for a big network, never devoting any of its programs to the education of children, as is the case in the U.S.

Of course, media ethics can only exist in a democracy. Whoever believes that humans are incapable of thinking independently, of running their own lives, cannot accept self-control. Auto-regulation can only be seriously considered in places that enjoy freedom of expression,⁸ relatively prosperous media and competent journalists, proud of their job. In poor countries, there are few consumers, hence little advertising; so media are penniless, corrupt, or subsidized and controlled by the State. This implies that in many nations, even though they be officially democratic, media ethics is largely irrelevant.

Why Now?

There was a time when, at the mention of media ethics, media professionals would respond with scornful silence or some angry remark. Now more and more of them are developing an interest. They show it in books, in the editorials and articles of newspapers, in special issues of trade magazines, in broadcasts, symposiums, workshops. Why?

When the question is asked of European journalists,⁹ their answers vary. They cite technological progress; concentration of ownership; the increasing commercialization of media; the mix of news and ads; the growing inaccuracy of the news; the Timisoara slaughter hoax¹⁰ and the Gulf War; serious violations of professional morals by some reporters (invasions of privacy, especially in the popular press); a decline of the profession's credibility and prestige; the unjustified role of media in a political crisis; unacceptable links between media and government; the threat of legal restrictions on freedom of the press; an awakening of journalists' associations; a reaction to the *laissez-faire* of the 1980s; violence and reality-shows on television, etc.

8. Freedom House judged that in 1998 out of 186 nations, only 37% enjoyed press freedom.

9. From surveys I did in some 15 countries in 1993, 1994 and 1998.

10. In 1989, as the Rumanian dictator's regime was crumbling, Western reporters were fooled with a few hospital corpses into reporting a massacre by the secret police.

6 Media Ethics and Accountability Systems

Factors of the Evolution

The main factors seem to number about half a dozen. First, the rise in the educational level of the public makes it more demanding and militant. More people understand how important good media services are; how unsuited to the modern world is the traditional concept of news. And media consumers are now realizing that they can and should do something about it.

Journalists are far better educated too. It seems that more of them wish to fulfill their functions satisfactorily and to enjoy greater social prestige. In that quest, the majority finds it unacceptable to suffer from the ethical misbehavior of a minority.

The mediocrity of media hurts even those who are to blame for it. Nearly everywhere, proprietors lament the decline of newspaper sales and of the time spent watching the major networks. Also the advertisers rightly worry about the credibility of the media in which they place their ads. Moreover, for a number of years, business people in general have shown more concern for the impact of the products they put on the market. More realize now that quality, that is to say public service, does pay.¹¹

Both the bad and the good effects of technology have helped media ethics. It makes media more democratic because more numerous and less expensive. At the same time, it causes distortion: the reporter on the scene talks directly to the viewer, with no pause to analyze. And the manipulation of information is made easier, the falsification of pictures especially.

And then, of course, there is the Web. In January 1998, for the first time, it was discovered to be a news medium—when Matt Drudge launched the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in cyberspace. Everyone can access Internet, which is wonderfully democratic. On the other hand, anybody can dump anything there. So the need will grow, ceaselessly, for honest screeners, for journalists that can be trusted, who are competent and accountable.

The growing profit-orientation of media makes them more sensitive to public opinion but it multiplies the reasons they have to distort the news and to vulgarize entertainment—and to mix the two. Highly visible is the proliferation of the professional persuaders: admen/press officers/media consultants/experts in electoral campaigning.

11. See James O'Toole, *Vanguard Management*, Garden City (NJ), Doubleday, 1985

Lastly, the collapse of the Soviet Union contributed to the change. By putting an end to the myth of a State solution to media problems, it revitalized ethics, the only acceptable strategy against exploitation of media by economic forces. Also, media ethics had suffered from being sometimes associated with communist propaganda, filled as the latter was with noble denunciations (of racism, of colonialism) and purple patches (about world peace or economic development)—which were echoed by the governments of “non-aligned” nations and, in democratic nations, relayed by various marxist academics.

Nowadays, ethics suffers mainly from not being known and understood by the general public, of course, but also, more surprisingly, in media circles.

General Structure

In the present book, first a few basic distinctions are made that are needed to clarify the atmosphere around the debate. Then comes an exposition of the principles on which media ethics is founded. Then comes a systematic presentation of the many clauses contained in codes of ethics. After that catalogue of rules, a chapter is devoted to what, very regrettably, is not to be found in codes—and is not often mentioned. The next chapter surveys the various nongovernmental means of inciting media to respect ethical rules. And the last chapter deals with the many obstacles and criticisms met by those accountability systems.

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- Brill's Content*, 521 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10175.
- Columbia Journalism Review*, Journalism Building, Columbia University, 2950 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.
- Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, c/o Erlbaum, 10 Industrial Ave, Mahwah, NJ 07430-2262.
- Media Ethics*, Division of Mass Communication, Emerson College, 100 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02116.

A Few Interesting Web Sites

- American JR : www.ajr.org
 California State U. Fullerton:
www.commfaculty.fullerton.edu/lester/ethics/ethics_list.html; then click on "media ethics"
 University of Tampere, Finland: for the texts of European codes
www.uta.fi/ethicnet
 Columbia JR: www.cjr.org
 ONO, world association of news ombudsmen:
www.infi.net/ono
 Poynter Institute: www.poynter.org provides links with many sites touching on media ethics
 Université de Paris-2, Institut français de presse
www.u-paris2.fr/ifp (then click on "media ethics"): links with world press councils and other sites concerned with media ethics.
 University of British Columbia, Centre for Applied Ethics
www.ethics.ubc.ca/resources/media

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