ESSAI

Volume 7 Article 34

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

McGowan, Sean (2009) "Ethics and Its Relation to the Media," $\it ESSAI: Vol. 7, Article 34. Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/34$

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Ethics and Its Relation to the Media

by Sean McGowan

(Philosophy 1110)

oday in the media, there is a deep urgency with most reporters to dive into a story and develop as much detail as possible. However, what other factors are important to consider in journalism? If taking an ethical approach, one could see where a career in journalism can be accompanied by certain moral obligations. How can the media today be certain that it is holding to its ethical responsibilities; however, without first having those responsibilities identified? As stated in *The Media and Morality*, by Robert M. Baird, William E. Loges, and Stuart E. Rosenbaum, "Lawyers and architects have their clients, doctors their patients, and teachers their students. But to whom are the media's professionals obligated?" (Baird, Loges, and Rosenbaum 11). One can see from this explanation where ethics can be a complex subject in the media. From the research done by ethicists I will explain what some see as responsible journalism, how to define public interest, and some moral values to consider in journalism.

Journalists believe they are in a field that is free and independent; therefore, their duties are entirely up to them. Authors Clifford G. Christians, Mark Fackler and Kim B. Rotzoll, in the book *Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning*, relay that the news world consists of "toughness and the ability to make quick decisions in the face of daily crises" (Christians, Fackler and Rotzoll ix). This being the case, journalists must have the minds to think and act on their own. Because of this perspective, much controversy has developed within the media today. For example, how can a journalist be freely independent, yet report stories of interest to the general public? How can a journalist determine when he has gone too far in his reporting? In other words, leaving the decision entirely up to the journalist does not necessarily make for stories by which readers of the news will be intrigued.

One example of where the media failed to take into account the interests of the general public is as follows; Jacques P. Thiroux and Keith W. Krasemann, authors of *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, comment on the Clinton-Lewinsky affair reported in the news at the time of Bill Clinton's presidency. Though this story held to the truth-telling principle (which will be discussed further) esteemed highly in the media, it did not have a significant affect on the public. Rather, the story was dragged out, seemingly as a means to rip apart Clinton's presidency.

According to Thiroux and Krasemann, "the issue for most Americans did not seem to be what the president did in his personal life, although no one condoned what he did, but, once caught, the president lied about the affair both on TV and under oath" (Thiroux and Krasemann 391). So it is that the significance of the story was not in the actual affair itself, but more so with the crime he committed after the affair.

Not only was the media dumping all blame onto Clinton, but the story was dragged out to a point where newscasts began to display indecent material on television as well (Thiroux and Krasemann 391). In other words, public broadcasting allowed for a high level of inappropriateness in the media.

This example brings me to the next point, Kant's "means to an ends" theory (a.k.a. practical imperative) and how it relates to media ethics. This theory, developed by philosopher Emmanuel Kant, explains that no person can be used as a means to someone's end because that person is an end in himself or herself (Thiroux and Krasemann 59). In other words, no human being that can think and reason towards a happy life, can be rightfully used solely to another's benefit.

The issue of the Clinton affair applies to this theory because journalists used the controversy as a means to bring out the dirt on President Clinton. From my perspective, this type of reporting is immoral because I do not see this as fulfilling the job of a journalist. Journalism should be a means to share the latest news to the general public in an unbiased manner, thus letting the public decide whether the story deserves more attention. In other words, journalists cannot simply drag out a story that they believe is of interest without truly understanding public concern.

Thus it would appear a good time to bring up the point of what it is to be tenacious, especially from a journalistic perspective. "Tenacity", as stated by Thiroux and Krasemann, "is the principle of being persistent" (Thiroux and Krasemann 392). In the world of journalism, one must uncover facts, details, and news by means of interviewing, undercover reporting, research, etc. Sometimes the ability to obtain necessary information can be more of a difficult process than others; therefore, one's ability to persist would be the most important aspect of news coverage. This is not to be confused with the point made earlier about overly pursuing a story, which, as explained earlier, can lead to controversy.

Now I will discuss the principle of truth-telling relative to media ethics. Truth-telling can be viewed in many different ways; though I will explain how the categorical imperative is used to justify truth telling since it is most used by American media (Christians, Fackler and Rotzoll 8). First I must define that Kant's categorical imperative is a universal law in that it applies to all without exception (Thiroux and Krasemann 58). To display how it is used by journalists to logically support truth-telling, it would be stated "In order to tell a lie, then the truth must be known; however, if everyone lied then there would be no truth; therefore, this is illogical because it is a contradiction." This is one of the most influential moral principles of today and is esteemed highly by journalists.

However, can this rule provide for misinterpretation or confusion? It would seem that if all journalists are compelled to tell the truth at all times that some stories may get to be too personal. Therefore, this further supports the idea that some journalists do not know where to draw the line. Although this seems to be a problem in some cases with the media, on whom does the blame fall? It may be that reporters cannot be held fully responsible if they fail to understand where morality comes into play in the long term. If ignorance is a large factor with how journalists carry out their work, then more blame should be put on the lack of education provided in the field of morality.

Another point to make is in the importance of defining and using equity as a moral principle. Equity is significant because it is the quality of treating others justly (Krasemann and Thiroux 392). Though there are many considerations to take in to determine what is fair, some clarity can be brought out on the subject. When relating this to the media world, one can say that fairness would lie in the journalist's ability or effort to cover the story in a way that holds every individual relating to a story at an equal level.

For example, two men may be serial murderers, though one could have been more torturous to the victims and committed more murders than the other. This; however, does not mean that a journalist should take on more of a biased outlook towards one murderer. If fairness is to be involved, the journalist will cover as much information as he is given to both sides of the spectrum with no personal opinion enforced.

Finally, a reporter should consider how diverse or broad the audience to whom he is releasing his story. It can be argued whether or not diversity is essential to life; however, the fact that there are many different forms of life as well as different ethnicities within the human race tells one that the world is a diverse place. Therefore, from an ethical perspective, there must be certain obligations human beings have in understanding and respecting each other's differences. A reporter cannot simply focus on white, middle-aged, males when considering who will read the newspaper or watch the news. It is safest to assume that every gender, ethnicity, religion, age group and so forth will be anticipating what story is next to come. Not only will this serve as a catalyst to developing a good reputation in the media but will also provide fairness in the news.

With the ever widening use of the internet to supply consumers with the latest news bulletins and a greater need to release the news quickly and effectively, media ethics must be pondered more thoroughly. If one does not take into account how news reports can be of issue, then the media will never be as ethical as is needed. However, moral principles developed by some of the renowned philosophical thinkers may one day lead to a general understanding of ethics in the media.

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