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Introduction: Contexts for Ethical Decision-Making

Ethics is not practiced in a vacuum. Choosing how to act occurs in particular contexts that exert various kinds of pressure on those making choices. So we will begin this book with attention to the various aspects of society and culture that affect the ethical choices made within them. Although we are presenting these as separate entities, it will become clear in the reading that they are so intertwined that it is difficult to speak of them separately. The value of doing so is to highlight them as important considerations. Once our initial analysis is complete, we will be able to show how various ethical perspectives relate to them, and then provide comments on how ethical decisions might reasonably be made within complex contexts.

Each of the following characteristics of societies and cultures forms a part of the overall context of moral choice. This differs not only from society to society, but from individual to individual. Some people in a society make choices based in large measure on religious commitments. Others are driven by the perceived demands of media technology or professions, and still others by ideological commitments. To fully understand the choices made, then, it is necessary to give some thought to how each of the following contexts may impact on them. We do not mean that ethics is relative, but that it is situational. People of goodwill may, within a given socio-cultural context, come to different decisions. Are all decisions equally ethical? We would say “no,” but to evaluate the ethics of choice it is useful to understand the context within which choices are made. Then we will have the basis for conversation as to whether a decision can be defended on ethical grounds.

Does the “Global Village” Imply a Global Media Ethics?

The first hurdle to overcome when thinking about global media ethics is the belief that a global village exists. It doesn't. There are markers of its existence, to be sure, but they are misleading, especially for those who see them from a Western perspective. Since the nineteenth century, the so-called century of progress, Western pundits and the popular media have touted the role of new communications technologies in “shrinking” the world, annihilating time and space, and allowing for universal connectivity for the world's peoples. The world wars of the twentieth century did little to dampen the enthusiasm, for global connection and expectations rose to new heights with the arrival of satellite communication, global media networks, and real-time reports from far-flung regions via, first, satellite telephony and then video feeds. The arrival and rapid spread of the internet continued the trend. The final burst of expectation (so far) was unleashed by the development of mobile smartphones using broadband systems and wireless capability. It seemed that all the barriers that had prevented global universal communication had been overcome by technological progress.

It is not difficult to find claims that the global village has arrived. The International Monetary Fund trumpeted its arrival in September 2012 (Mahbubani, 2012, p. 1). Kishore Mahbubani claimed the milestone that justified this claim was that teledensity had reached the point that people had “become interconnected at a level never seen before in history,” and that such technology (mobile telephones and the internet) had generated global convergence that, along with education, had improved human lives (Ibid.).

The problem with such claims is that they ignore more than they reveal. There is little doubt that connectivity among people is more widely distributed, and used in greater measure, than ever before. In 2014 the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated that there were 6.9 billion mobile-cellular subscriptions around the world, nearly equal to the total population of the planet. However, somewhat fewer than three billion people had access to the internet, with access in developing countries reaching only 32% (ITU, 2014). The main reason for the difference is the much lower access to mobile broadband internet services in the developing world where wired infrastructure is not available.

Related to this difference in access to technology is the problem with seeing all connections as equally capable of accessing content. For instance, although the teledensity in the continent of Africa has increased several times over in the past decade, much of this development has provided only the barest connection to people. In Ivory Coast, for instance, 3G+ mobile coverage in 2014 was limited to 10 urban areas, and those that were connected to these systems, although they could access the internet, could see YouTube content at only 240p, the site’s minimum resolution, while the more highly developed infrastructures in other countries allowed for 1040p HD (high-definition) connections. Rural areas of Ivory Coast were still without any broadband coverage at all, limiting use of mobile telephones to voice and SMS (text). On many of the islands in the Pacific, including those that are part of the Philippines and Indonesia, the only television available is through satellite delivery, and then only when generators are used to provide the power for connection. In mountainous areas, such as Nepal, the same situation applies and even radio is problematic since the most prevalent system employed is frequency modulation (VHF/FM), which uses only line of sight signals that are easily blocked by the terrain. The absence of a power grid also makes people dependent on expensive batteries that can only be replaced by trekking often long distances into towns on treacherous footpaths. Such circumstances make talk of a global village more of a fantasy than a reality.

Besides such access issues, many other obstacles continue to frustrate efforts to think of the world as a global village. People who have the good fortune to see films or television programs made in other countries, for instance, rarely see the reality of people’s lives. Television does not thrive on careful documentaries of the lives of ordinary people living ordinary lives. Typically, actors portray others and, in so doing, interpret their scripts according to preconceptions that may have no firm foundation in the ordinary social, cultural, or economic lives of those they purport to represent. Many programs, regardless of source, are formulaic indigenized versions of programs that have attracted audiences in other countries. Often they become caricatures of the original, because the premise of the formula was culture-bound and those in the knock-off have altered their personas to qualify for the program. These two realities are “thin,” barely scratching the surface of authentic portrayal. Even “thicker” programs, such as carefully crafted documentary approaches, are the perceptions of single filmmakers of “the other”; few to none are actually produced by those indigenous to the community portrayed.

So, despite the growth of global telephony, wired and wireless internet services, and widespread distribution of cultural products, the claim of a global village is actually a chimera – at best less than half the world’s population could be said to be within range of this ideal. But despite the lack of a single media environment – a truly global village – there are still good reasons to think of ethics in a global perspective. Increasingly citizen reporters, bloggers, tweeters, and YouTube video producers seek

global audiences. From #BringBackOurGirls to propaganda and recruitment videos produced by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria),¹ media producers – amateur and professional – are appealing both to political establishments and to the global public sphere. The same is true of those who parody terrorists in the Middle East in their own viral videos, some using music videos or Lego figures (Zahriyeh, 2015).

The Political-Economic Context of Global Media Ethics

Although there are various political and economic relationships that bind countries together through international conventions and organizations, free trade agreements, trade pacts, and technological connections via fiber optic undersea cables and satellites, such relationships are only operable so long as the countries so bound find them to be in their own best interests. They are all subject to the sovereignty claims of the signatories. All international conventions must be ratified by individual countries to have authority within them. Countries may take reservations when signing to indicate their intention not to be bound by certain aspects of them. Trade pacts can be abrogated, alliances broken, connections shut off at borders. They can also simply be broken when considered inconvenient. There is no universal method of enforcing such agreements or connections.

Political economy is concerned with the moral or ethical results of political and economic practices. Since these practices differ from one country to another, the contests that exist between efforts to reveal (practiced by media practitioners) and those to conceal or control, also differ. Several different political and economic configurations within countries affect both the context for ethical decisions and the fragmentation of the “global village.” Many countries have constitutional, regulatory, or philosophical commitments to free expression, although actual compliance with them is problematic. For instance, questions were raised in the United States as a result of the Obama administration’s efforts to uncover leaks claimed to compromise national security, and in Britain as a result of both leaks and a hacking scandal that resulted in prosecutions of staff members of the now-closed *News of the World*. There have been official efforts to shut down Twitter in Turkey, China has restricted websites that raised moral issues by publishing pornographic images (including bare-breasted female anime characters), and in India the court found that the publication of an academic book (available in other countries for some time) in Hindi could foment religious unrest. In Fiji two journalists received death threats for their reports about a cancelled live television debate between the leading contenders for the post of prime minister. Iran and Russia have been developing their own internet that restricts access to connections outside their own countries and China has established the so-called “Great Firewall” to accomplish the same ends.

In addition, conflicts in various countries have led not only to arrests of journalists and bloggers, but also to denials of entry and manhunts of Russian journalists in Ukraine; expulsion and denial of entry to journalists in Yemen; prosecution of Al-Jazeera journalists in Egypt as terrorists; murders of journalists in Pakistan by Taliban factions (as well as expulsion of Indian journalists) and in the Philippines by Marxist-inspired separatists; street protests against restrictions on journalists in Venezuela; and rewritten laws governing expression in Kenya, Russia, and Libya (although overturned by the Libyan Supreme Court), among many other happenings. Many journalists, videographers, photojournalists, and filmmakers have also died covering the Syrian, Sudanese, and Congolese civil wars, in the Palestinian territories, and in ongoing sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many others have found themselves kidnapped or “detained.” The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), for instance, lists 1,054 journalists killed since 1992 (617 of them “with impunity”), and 211 journalists in prison in 2013 (cpj.org). And in Europe a non-governmental organization (NGO) called the

European Initiative for Media Pluralism began registering in different countries in the effort to collect signatures to create a new European Commission directive to fight against media monopoly, seeking to “enshrine the severance of ties between media, business and politics in the different media states in a lawful manner on an EU [European Union] level” (Novinite.com, 2014). All of these realities influence the perceived relevance and practice of ethics by media practitioners.

The Cultural-Religious Context of Global Media Ethics

The religious fragmentation of the planet is well documented, but even the division of religion into Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Shinto, or “traditional” groups fails to capture the differences that actually exist. There are many variations within each of these groups, some so severe that it is sometimes difficult to see them as part of the same tradition. In addition to the obvious divisions, say between Catholics and Protestants, or Shia and Sunni Muslims, there are many other subgroups and “heretical” sects that could be identified. There are also humanists, non-believers, cultural adherents (or nominal believers), and those who say they are spiritual but not religious. The implication of this fragmentation is that “religious” bases for moral choice abound. Morality is a broad concept. It is, as Bernard Gert defined it, “an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behavior that affects others, and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal” (quoted in “The definition of morality,” 2011). This generic definition of the term does not suggest where any individual’s sense of morality is grounded. For the billions of people on the planet who adhere to a religious tradition, however, there is a connection between their faith’s requirements for behavior and its adherents’ sense of morality. Although not all religions have scriptures (or holy books), all do have parents and teachers (including priests, imams, and gurus, among others) who pass along moral prescriptions to those who are either born into, or choose to follow, the tradition. As Paul Bloom (2012, p. 184) puts it: “Through holy texts and the proclamations of authority figures, religions make moral claims about abortion, homosexuality, duties to the poor, charity, masturbation, just war, and so on. People believe these claims because, implicitly or explicitly, they trust the sources. They accept them on faith.”

Of course, the requirements of each faith differ, sometimes profoundly, from each other. What one faith considers a necessary moral requirement, another doesn’t deal with at all. Despite the clear relationship between Judaism and Christianity, for instance, the moral expectations for the treatment of debt, or the appropriate response to insult, differ. And, as suggested above, those within a particular tradition can have quite different ideas about abortion, capital punishment, or the treatment of the poor. Nevertheless, religion remains an important source of moral thought among the world’s religious people.

Not only are people divided by religious commitments, there are also cultural divides to consider. Cultural divides, whether defined by tribe, clan, ethnicity, race, or visions of history, can even trump common moral commitments within religious traditions. Christians in Rwanda were both victims and perpetrators in the 1994 genocide. Sunni Muslims kill Shia Muslims in Iraq. Israeli Jews disagree profoundly about what to do to gain peace in the Middle East. Hindus judge one another more on the basis of caste than common faith. It sometimes seems too easy to ignore religious proscriptions on behavior when acting in response to propaganda or to historical inequities or atrocities. Death is not necessarily a function of hatred between nation-states. Robert Kaplan (1996, p. 8) reminds us that “of the eighty wars since 1945, only twenty-eight have taken the traditional form of fighting between regular armies of two or more states. Forty-six were civil wars or guerrilla insurgencies. . . . The fighting in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, and elsewhere suggested that this anarchic trend was proliferating.”

The Professional Context of Global Media Ethics

Media practitioners function in quite different professional contexts around the globe. In some countries, and notably in the United States, there are no requirements of any kind before a person can work in the media, including journalism. Requiring any education, credentials, examination, registration, or endorsement is seen as anathema to the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment guarantee of a free press (with the press including all forms of media work). However, in many cases press credentials issued by a government or other agency (such as a local police force or organizing committee) are required for access to particular events or venues.

Other countries, however, do require some basic qualifications, especially for journalists. In Brazil, for instance, practicing as a journalist required a university degree in journalism and registration with the Labor Ministry from 1969 until the Supreme Court of Brazil abolished it in 2009 (see Lago and Fernandez, 2011). Nine other Latin American countries continue to have similar requirements (Kirtley, 2010). In Italy a journalist must have a university degree, pass an entrance examination given by the professional Order of Journalists, and be a member of the Order. In France the National Union of Journalists recommends that would-be journalists attend a certified university program in journalism, although it is possible to enter the profession without such a degree. It is more difficult, however, absent the degree, to be employed at more prestigious media organizations. In Portugal, there are no university degree requirements, but – practically speaking – anyone who desires employment as a journalist would do well to have one (Fidalgo, 2008).

“In a small number of countries,” according to Article 19 (an international free expression monitoring and advocacy organization), “the law provides for the possibility of temporarily, or even permanently, stripping an individual of the right to practice journalism or other media professions.” Since licensing, per se, is impermissible under international law when exercised by a government authority, this “power is exercised by courts as a sanction in criminal proceedings.” Several Kyrgyz journalists “were barred from practicing journalism for 18 months” when they were convicted of libeling the director of a state-owned gold-mining company in 1997 (Article 19, n.d.).

In Timor-Leste veteran journalist José Belo protested a new media law that he warned would signal the death of Timorese journalists' spirits due to its restrictions on who could or could not operate as a journalist, stipulations on information access, and government control of the regulating press council body (Robie, 2014). And in China, before any trial determined guilt or innocence, accused journalists were required, by mid-2014, to confess their “crime” on national television:

For the second time in a week, a Chinese journalist . . . has appeared on China's state-owned broadcaster, confessing to alleged crimes. “I have made up things that are not facts,” said . . . Xiang Nanfu, a frequent freelance contributor to New York-based Chinese language website Boxun.com. “My behavior has had a very bad impact. I realize that I have smeared the ruling party and the government.”

(Roberts, 2014)

Practicing media work, in other words, occurs in a variety of professional contexts – some defined by unions, some by court mandate, some by censorship, some by law, some by educational requirements, and some by unspecified, but widely known, expectations.

The Moral Context of Global Media Ethics

It is a mistake to assume that the basic moral commitments in one society are identical to those in another. Although there are some basic universals, such as prohibitions against taking the life of another, respecting the other's human dignity, not harming the innocent, and truth-telling, adhering merely to these four proto-norms, as Clifford G. Christians and Michael Traber (1997) call them, provides only a "thin" ethics. What we mean is that, although these four commitments are essential, they are also of limited use in making moral choices in media work. By definition universal values are applicable across all societies and cultures. They also apply equally to those in media as much, or as little, as they apply to other professionals, tradesmen, laborers, or stay-at-home mothers. They are not unique to media workers who are unlikely to be in situations where they would have to choose whether or not to take a life or harm the innocent, if such demands are interpreted in the context of people's usual material existence. Media workers, however, especially those in the entertainment or culture industries, may face these issues in productions where violence is part of the story, calling for symbolic deaths, torture, rape, or beatings, or where people are symbolically dehumanized, but these choices are on a different order than those made in everyday life. They are depictions – sometimes justified, sometimes not – but the violence or dehumanization affects characters portrayed by actors, not actual people.

We find it useful to start with universals, however, as they are foundational. They are necessary, but also insufficient, for the moral character of societies is not entirely – perhaps not even primarily – universal. For instance, U.S. television programs contain much more violence than those in most of the rest of the world. This violence, too, is more explicit than the artful portrayals in Asia or those that are left to the imagination by European television producers. European television, however, does not shy away from scenes with fully nude actors, a production choice that is simply not made in U.S. or Asian programs (at least on readily accessible on-air channels). In Russia and several African countries, and most notably in Uganda, the media must tread lightly when reporting, or including in entertainment programs, information that would be considered homosexual "propaganda" or advocacy – again on moral grounds. In some countries, too, notably those with large populations of Muslims, not only is nudity prohibited, but also any programming that is considered blasphemous, something not avoided in U.S. or European programs. In China, media products, including social media, are prohibited from questioning the legitimacy of the Communist Party – often for "moral" reasons. It is difficult in some cases for Chinese journalists to pursue stories of corrupt officials.

For example, Xinran (2002, chapter 1) was a presenter for the Chinese state radio service and received a letter from a young village boy pleading for intercession for a young girl who had been purchased by an old man to be his wife. The boy suspected she had been kidnapped. Xinran contacted the local police and one policeman reluctantly agreed to help, although he told her, "In the countryside the heavens are high and the emperor is far away.' In his opinion the law had no power there." She went to the village with the police, who freed the girl whose family lived 22 hours away by train. They had been searching frantically for her. "I received no praise for the rescue of this girl, only criticism for 'moving the troops about and stirring up the people' and wasting the radio station's time and money. . . . Just what was a woman's life worth in China?" In many countries this would be considered a moral issue – but not by officials in China.

In 2015 in Saudi Arabia a cartoonist was sentenced to death for apostasy, the result of filming himself tearing up a copy of the Koran and hitting it with his shoe (a sign of disrespect in the Middle East) (Spencer, 2015). This would be seen in many countries as freedom of expression, even if distasteful, but in most Middle Eastern countries such behavior is punishable by execution.

It also seems clear, despite the existence of universals, that a people – defined by tribe, clan, ethnicity, or race – can find ways to avoid, at least in their own minds, the approbation that might otherwise attach to them for immoral actions. Serbs found ways to legitimize ethnic cleansing, radical Hutus to legitimize genocide (see Fortner, 2006). As Martha Minow (1998, p. 11) put it: “At a societal level, as the recent conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda have only too vividly demonstrated, memories, or propaganda-inspired illusions about memories, can motivate people who otherwise live peaceably to engage in torture and slaughter of neighbors identified as members of groups who committed past atrocities. The results can be devastating, escalating intergroup violence. Mass killings are the fruit of revenge for perceived past harms.” More recently, Dinka and Nuer tribesmen in South Sudan, Syrians, Ukrainians (including ethnic Russians), and Egyptians have engaged in mass violence against countrymen using a variety of justifications. The list of atrocities continues to lengthen. Despite universals, moral contexts vary and can justify to perpetrators sometimes unspeakable atrocities.

The Legal Context of Global Media Ethics

Some countries operate under a clearly defined rule of law. This means, as the World Justice Project puts it, that (1) the government and its officials and agents as well as individuals and private entities are accountable under the law, (2) laws are clear, publicized, stable, just, and are applied evenly to protect fundamental rights, (3) the process by which laws are enacted, administered, and enforced is accessible, fair, and efficient, and (4) justice is delivered in a timely manner by competent, ethical, and independent representatives who are of sufficient number and adequately funded, and reflect the makeup of the communities they serve (“What is the Rule of Law?,” 2014). In other words, all persons or institutions are subject to laws equally applied within a society, regardless of status, or economic/political significance. The principle of rule of law is “at the heart of the United Nations’ mission,” embedded in its Charter (“United Nations and the Rule of Law,” 2014).

The World Justice Project has ranked 99 countries, based on nine factors and 47 sub-factors, using surveys provided both to local experts and to general publics, on the rule of law. Its analysis concluded that the rule of law was strongest in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands, and weakest in Cameroon, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, and Venezuela. In general, sub-Saharan African countries fared worst, and European countries, New Zealand, and Australia fared best, as groups. Some representative rankings include: Canada 11, Japan 12, South Korea 14, Hong Kong 16, the United States 19, Malaysia 35, South Africa 40, Indonesia 46, Mongolia 51, Vietnam 65, India 66, Egypt 74, China 76, Russia 80, Kenya 86, Myanmar 89, and Bangladesh 92 (“WJP Rule of Law Index,” 2014).

Respect for and application of the rule of law by all parties in society – including government and corporate leaders, media professionals, educators, and other professionals – provides a basic platform for resolution of disputes, justice for both criminals and victims, and a foundation for civility and trust. Ethical practices are enabled by such commitments and practices.

But ethics and law are not identical. Laws can be just but still immoral. As the American jurist Thane Rosenbaum (2005, p. 22) puts it: “what passes for justice in America is often immoral justice – a resolution that makes sense legally and can be explained and justified by judges, lawyers, and law professors simply by conforming, in a very formalistic sense, to precedent and procedure, but ultimately feels emotionally and morally wrong to everyone else. Justice that doesn’t feel just, but instead feels like a colossal misnomer.” Expanding on this, he provides this example: “But to stand apart from the crowd, and stand up for friends and neighbors – even if they are strangers – to oppose

governmental authority when it lacks moral authority, to rescue fellow men from danger, may be the right thing to do morally, even if it's not reasonable to do so" (Ibid., p. 29).

Traditional practices can warp the application of law, or even overwhelm it. In West Africa, for instance, the traditional practice of "dash" (gift-giving for services rendered) provides incentive for people to rise to power and to rain gifts on those who assisted in their rise: "The bigger the man, the bigger the 'dash' for the favour received. The 'Big Man' became an accepted feature of West African life, a patron fostering his followers by his fame and fortune" (Meredith, 2005, p. 172). Since the loyalist followers tended to be from the Big Man's own tribe or clan, this tradition made it seem acceptable, in many cases, for him to shower largesse within these circles – as well as to engender resentment from other tribes or clans that would then rebel, leading to decades of instability.

Operationally, such a tradition meant that certain people would be favored for government contracts, or licenses to operate mining, import-export, or agricultural enterprises (cocoa or sugar cane growers, etc.), leading to narrow concentrations of wealth (see Ibid., pp. 278, 686). This wealth could either be legitimate or ill-gotten, depending on the particulars.

Such practices are not restricted to West Africa. Payments for "services rendered" exists in many parts of the world in the form of purchased news stories or favorable coverage in otherwise legitimate coverage. One study of the situation in India (Sharma, 2013, p. 9) linked the practice of purchasing positive media coverage with a rising level of organized and institutionalized corruption. Sanjay Kumar wrote about this problem as long ago as 2010:

Following last year's elections in Maharashtra, allegations surfaced that the local media had taken thousands of dollars from politicians in return for publishing favourable news stories about them. And, in a panel discussion at the Ramnath Goenka Awards [India's awards for excellence in journalism], executives from India's leading media accepted the sad truth that such media payments are indeed commonplace today. Arun Shourie, an eminent journalist and politician from the right wing Bhartiya Janata Party, accused the media of adopting the "politics of silence" over this issue, arguing that broadly speaking, there was little internal debate or introspection among the nation's media houses. According to Star News CEO Uday Shankar, the main reason is (perhaps not surprisingly) the significant amounts of money that media houses are earning from paid news.

(Kumar, 2010)

In this case the initiation of such paid relationships came from the press itself, not from those seeking favorable coverage.

Julie Moos (2010), writing for the Poynter Institute about the situation in the United States, says that "journalism organizations that once refused to pay sources now write them large checks for access to information. They label these payments 'licensing fees,' and in return they receive photos, video, emails, or cell phone records. In the process, they lose credibility and simultaneously strengthen the market for checkbook journalism." Quoting Paul Friedman, then senior vice president at CBS News, she continued: "If we all drew a line again, maybe we could stop this . . . But that's probably hopelessly naïve. It's out of the bottle."

Economics, Acquisition, and Materialism in Global Media Ethics

Although many of the media systems set up around the world during the twentieth century followed the public service model pioneered by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), most media in the

twenty-first century have adopted a commercial model with their activities directed by commercial considerations – achieving a profit. However, profitable media organizations have also become more difficult to sustain. This has resulted, sometimes, in successful non-media entrepreneurs, such as Jeff Bezos of Amazon and Pierre Omidyar of eBay, investing in media properties or in the continuing development of multinational media conglomerates, such as News Corporation (owned by Rupert Murdoch). In 2001 seven multinational corporations dominated the global media market. These were Disney, AOL-Time Warner, Sony, News Corporation, Viacom, Vivendi, and Bertelsmann (McChesney, 2001). By 2015, however, indicative of the rapid changes in media-related technologies, the world's largest media corporations included Comcast, Disney, 21st Century Fox, Time Warner, Time Warner Cable, DirecTV (later purchased by AT&T), WPP (a UK-based company), CBS, Viacom, and BSKyB (Le, 2015). All of them operate on a for-profit basis.

What this means is that, for them to flourish, they must either charge for access to media material, or they must sell access to audiences to their advertisers, or both. The result is an increasingly materialist alternative to traditional culture and lives increasingly dominated by personal acquisition of goods. The consequences?

Using statistics and psychological tests, researchers are nailing down what clerics and philosophers have preached for millennia: Materialism is bad for the soul. Only, in the new formulation, materialism is bad for your emotional well-being. In recent years, researchers have reported an ever-growing list of downsides to getting and spending – damage to relationships and self-esteem, a heightened risk of depression and anxiety, less time for what the research indicates truly makes people happy, like family, friendship and engaging work. And maybe even headaches. “Consumer culture is continually bombarding us with the message that materialism will make us happy,” said Tim Kasser, a psychology professor at Knox College in Illinois who has led some of the recent work. “What this research shows is that that’s not true.”

(Goldberg, 2006)

The Bahai author Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian says that materialism is devastating both to society and to individuals; it creates a moral dilemma – unbridled accumulation of wealth or response to economic injustice and corruption:

Materialism in moral terms . . . can have destructive consequences and may permeate society as a form of social dysfunction. It is an acquired condition and state of mind which develops as a result of a number of factors, including materialistic education, parental attitudes and socio-cultural influences. To remedy this condition, a reconstruction of society's mindset and attitude toward the accumulations of wealth and greedy attachment to it is needed, through a consciousness of and belief in intrinsic moral values and the spiritual reality of existence which transcend dependence on material wealth as a lifestyle.

(Ghadirian, 2010, p. x)

Politics and Face-Saving in Global Media Ethics

Politics is practiced differently in societies around the globe. We do not mean by this that some are representative democracies, others parliamentary democracies, or autocracies, dictatorships or monarchies, although these exist. More significant than the type of government, however, are the practices of politics. An autocracy, for instance, can be authoritarian or benign. A democracy can be

inclusive or exclusive – simply by declaring some residents to be *persona non grata* when it comes to basic rights or claiming the benefits of citizenship. Simply labeling a government is insufficient to understanding how it works, seeks, and maintains legitimacy, deals with dissent, or what it allows by way of access to communication systems or content.

There is an important dimension to politics that reflects cultural values and demonstrates a dimension of moral choices in society. This is the notion of face. In their study of politeness in politics in the United States, Dailey, Hinck, and Hinck (2008, p. 13) argue that debates between candidates represent a clear clash of images that include both positive and negative face. Even the ritualized nature of these debates, and thus criticisms of their artificiality, do not reduce their value. Candidates who refuse to debate, they say, “risk losing political face.” But the stakes are different for each participant. Sometimes balance is expected, while in others, “audiences might be expecting one candidate to show a greater degree of aggression or support” (Ibid.). What matters is whether the face expressed, or defended by a candidate, accords with the expectations of him or her by the audience.

No political candidate (or any other individual, for that matter) is without flaw. This makes face-saving a continual issue as information is uncovered, distributed, or interpreted in various ways. To protect face requires one to be continually on-guard. It can also mean dissembling, or contorting, the truth, sometimes in fantastical ways, to protect face. The more deeply the idea of face is interwoven in culture, the more problematic ethics may be within that context.

One historic encounter between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1962 over missile launchers in Cuba raised the possibility of a nuclear exchange when the United States blockaded Cuban ports. The rhetoric ratcheted up between the two superpowers. But eventually, if war was to be avoided, it became necessary for the two countries – and their respective leaders, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev – to save face. Stella Ting-Toomey (1990, p. 80) explained that these two leaders searched for ways that would allow them to retain both personal and national honor in the effort to de-escalate the conflict. In 2014, in another dispute between the United States and Russia, RIA Novosti claimed, based on opinions of Russian experts, that U.S. vice president Joe Biden visited Ukraine “to explore the possibilities for Washington’s face-saving exit from its foreign policy catastrophe” (“Biden to test US face-saving retreat plan for Ukraine,” 2014). As Brown (1977, p. 275) puts it: “Among the most troublesome kinds of problems that arise in negotiation are the intangible issues related to loss of face. In some instances, protecting against loss of face becomes so central an issue that it swamps the importance of the tangible issues at stake and generates intense conflicts that can impede progress toward agreement and increase substantially the costs of conflict resolution.”

The United States is what is referred to as a “low-context” culture. In such cultures the communication is more direct and there is relatively little concern with non-verbal cues. Many other societies, however, are “high-context” cultures, especially those in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Face is a more serious issue in these parts of the globe.

In Thailand, Krisana Kitiyadisai (2005, p. 18) writes: “conflict avoidance or non-confrontation can be disastrous as it results in ‘losing-face’ (‘siar-na’) by either side of the conflict. ‘Face’ represents one’s social and professional position, reputation and self-image, so that a loss of face is to be prevented or avoided at all costs – which further means that face-saving or ‘koo-na’ has to be instigated at critical junctures.”

Similarly, in China politics is often driven by the perceived necessity for saving face. Xing Lu (2000, pp. 11–12) says that accusations from the West about human rights violations in China are often met with countercharges, a strategy based on ignoring the accusation and responding with threats: “These are, in fact, face-saving strategies. Instead of arguing against the actual charges, China chose to counterattack, ignore, and pose new threats.” Another similar strategy, he says, is to disregard the premise underlying the attack and then direct attention to a different set of variables and situations:

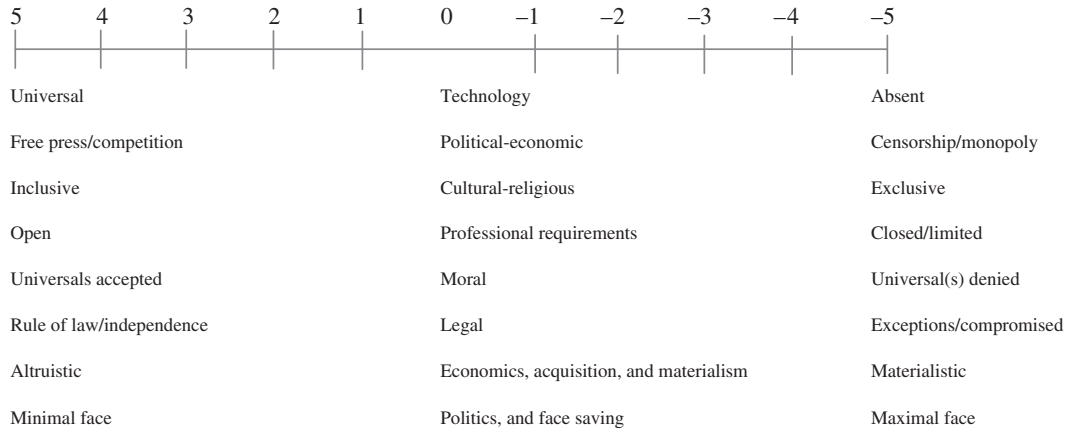


Figure 1.1 Ethical context factors (see text for details).

“For example, according to [Mao’s principle of *bu bi ran* (probability)] instead of responding to human rights violation charges from the U.S., the Chinese government countercharges the U.S. with racial discrimination of its own citizens. This approach may not appear logical, but it recognizes the complexity and intricacy of argumentation. Such a strategy is employed by the Chinese government as a means of face saving” (Ibid., p. 12).

Section Summary

We have covered eight dimensions of societies that can help distinguish one from another and that have implications for the practice of ethics. One way to think of these dimensions is as a set of scales, each numbered from five to zero (center) and then again from zero (center) to five (see Figure 1.1). The closer a society adheres to the left side of any of these factors, the more amenable it is to ethical choices; the closer to the right, the more poisonous the context for ethical choice. But even when all the factors are far to the right, ethical choices can still be made. Ethics is more likely to face opposition, however, and those making ethical choices will be battling against various societal expectations when compared to those making choices on the left-hand side. The opportunity to act ethically is more obvious on the left side, but merely operating within such a welcoming environment does not guarantee that ethics will govern choice. There are both different philosophies of ethics and the different purposes of media work to consider. We will take up philosophies in the next two chapters. First, however, we will focus on the reasons for, and expectations of, media workers – their purpose in society.

Freedom of the Press

The Anglo-American ideal of a free press, founded in post-Enlightenment political philosophy and enshrined most clearly in the United States’ First Amendment to its Constitution (part of what is referred to as the Bill of Rights), has gradually become a near-universal ideal around the world. The original impetus for a free press arose during the era of monarchy (political and religious), in which both sedition and blasphemy were highly controlled through censorship and licensing, with penalties for violations ranging from fines, to imprisonment and execution. Elites were in control. Rational

arguments against strict control were originally raised by John Milton, who argued that suppression of ideas was nonsensical unless the suppressor could be absolutely certain in his opinion – impossible in Milton’s view. This was perhaps not so obvious to the elites in control, many of whom clung to the idea that they were God’s appointed rulers. But such arguments did find resonance in the small, but growing, business community that depended on information for their success. Many of them were part of the minority of literate citizens who could see the value of a free press to their own livelihoods. These citizens were the core of what Jürgen Habermas would call the public sphere.

The American and French Revolutions claimed rights for the common people that had been suppressed during the previous autocratically dominated centuries when most people did not count. The idea of “one man, one vote” took on a reality that required an informed citizenry. Freedom of the press took on a new urgency, reinforced by John Stuart Mill’s robust defense of its necessity and by the fact that, by about 1850, a majority of people in Western societies were literate (see Fortner, 2013). The need for accurate and up-to-date information was made obvious, too, by the developments in print, film, and radio propaganda in the First and Second World Wars. When the European colonial empires began to disintegrate after the Second World War, with these new societies often heavily influenced by the practices of former colonial rulers, it was common for freedom of the press to be assumed, although economic realities and political instability usually meant state-controlled radio, and later television, systems were developed. Eventually most of these succumbed to new economic realities, massive foreign debt, and slow development, leading to private and commercial ownership of broadcasting.

This all-too-brief and generalized history suggests a central axis in considering the value of a free press: the control of information. Government or corporate elites have attempted to control the distribution of information by requiring licenses for media organizations, licensing media workers, censoring the distribution of information, and using civil law statutes. Additionally, they have influenced the flow of information by engaging in propaganda (including both truthful and false advertising and public relations), funding, creating, and distributing films and radio and television programs, running disinformation campaigns, copyrighting and trademarking intellectual products, dumping products at prices far below their value to establish footholds in new markets, buying up competitors, using national security or proprietary information labels, or even denying any knowledge of information sought by others. Although such tactics may from time to time affect the activities of media organizations – most of which are corporate entities – the real effect of such practices is to influence the interpretation of what a free press is. During the Cold War (1946–1991) Western nations famously argued that there was no free press in the Soviet Union and its client states since the Communist Party controlled the distribution of information. The Soviets and their allies responded in kind, saying there was no free press in the West as its media were controlled by corporate owners that would only publish what was in their own economic interests.

In the twenty-first century countries around the world have embraced the idea of a free press. There are some exceptions, such as North Korea and Cuba (although Cuba began to open up in 2016), and there are also multiple criticisms of the People’s Republic of China, Malaysia, East Timor, Brazil, Egypt, Ukraine, Russia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somaliland, South Sudan, Serbia, Hungary, Turkey, Iran, and many others when it comes to actual practices concerning the free press. The United States and the United Kingdom have also been heavily criticized, the former for their treatment of journalists reporting based on leaked information and latter for the creation of an independent commission as a result of the hacking scandal in that country. Reporters without Borders’ annual *World Press Freedom Index*, which ranks the countries of the world on their degree of press freedom, ranked Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Syria, China, Vietnam, Iran, Sudan, and Laos at the bottom of its index of 180 countries in 2016 (www.rsf.org).

A free press, along with free expression, are seen by its advocates both as a necessity for democracy and as a basic human right. Index on Censorship's Senior Advocacy Officer, Melody Patry, said in May 2014, for instance, that "free expression is the foundation of a free society. Enabling journalists to report on matters without the threat of censorship or violations against them means promoting the right to freedom of expression and information, which is a fundamental and necessary condition for the promotion and protection of all human rights in a democratic society" (Kirkland, 2014). Indonesia's Melani Indra Hapsari, responding to a query from the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, wrote in the same month that "every country needs press freedom. [The] Press is the watchdog of government. I can't imagine how I can work without press freedom. . . . Journalists must work in press freedom to freely report good and bad news including news about government corruption, bad policy, or other important things that the audience needs to know. Press freedom brings benefit for the country and region. It encourages democracy, good governance, and good society" ("Southeast Asian journalists speak out for press freedom," 2014).

The United Nations has taken up the debate on the status of a "right to communicate" several times since 1974. Although no formal instrument has been ratified guaranteeing such a right, various resolutions have been drafted, discussed, and adopted by various organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1974), and the MacBride Commission (1980), along with ad hoc resolutions such as the People's Communication Charter (1993), the Universal Communications Rights Charter (1994), the Vdeazimut Declaration of Capetown (1998), the Tash Resolution (1992, 2000), and the Draft Declaration on the Right to Communicate (2003), among several others. Article 19 has defined the right to communicate, "in its widest sense, as 'the right of every individual or community to have its stories and views heard'" (Right to Communicate," 2002"). This claimed right is not restricted to the news media (what is often called "the press"), but to all forms of expression used by individuals, communities, and organizations. For example, in 2014 the Tibetan filmmaker Dhondhup Wangchen was released from a Chinese prison after six years of incarceration for making a film, *Leaving Film Behind*, which the Chinese government claimed was subversive and incited separatism for the region. Matteo Mecacci, president of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), welcomed his release: "Freedom of expression is a universal right and must be exercised by all citizens" (Coonan, 2014a).

The foundational declaration undergirding these various conversations and concerns is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 soon after the creation of the United Nations. Article 19 of this declaration states that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

The Universal Declaration was adopted after vigorous lobbying by former U.S. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. It was a product of its time, adopted shortly following the end of the Second World War – a war waged not only militarily but through propaganda – and by warring countries that were largely a product of the Western Enlightenment tradition. The various statements that followed it were likewise heavily influenced by Western nations committed to free expression and convinced that only by guaranteeing it would the democracy they had fought for in the mid-twentieth century be spread throughout the world. Adherence to the principle, however, has always been problematic, largely because of different interpretations of "human rights." Asian nations, for instance, "reject outright the globalization of human rights and claim that Asia has a unique set of values, which . . . provide the basis for Asia's different understanding of human rights and justify the 'exceptional' handling of rights by Asian governments" (Li, 2001, pp. 397–398). They are not part of what Charles Taylor (2001, p. 411) has called "the Western Rights tradition."

If nations are unable to agree about the centrality of communication to human rights, this creates a problematic reality for those who work in communication professions. On what basis should they argue for a special status for their work on behalf of people, whether to inform, entertain, or interact? The answer to this quandary, we think, is an emphasis on social responsibility. Regardless of the sort of society that people live in, or what cultural or legal philosophy undergirds their society, everyone can agree, we propose, that media organizations and practitioners should have a responsibility to the society they ostensibly serve. What does this entail?

Social Responsibility

Merely to affirm rights without the expectation of responsibility is to accept only what Isaiah Berlin in (1958/2002) referred to as “negative liberty.” It is freedom *from* – from government intrusion, prosecution, censorship, and so on. There is, however, another sort of liberty: positive liberty. This is freedom *for* – freedom to accomplish some positive outcome. For media work this is the sort of freedom that social responsibility theory advocates, and one of the animating ideas of this book. Although this theory has its roots in the early twentieth century, its most powerful advocate was the Commission on Freedom of the Press, chaired by Robert Hutchins in the United States in the late 1940s. This Commission (often referred to as the Hutchins Commission) released its report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, in 1947. This report was of course written to address the situation only in the United States, so after outlining the Commission’s conclusions, it will be necessary here to address two other issues: first, does it apply to other contexts, and second, has the development of media technology made its conclusions obsolete? But first we will examine the report itself.

The Commission concluded (Hutchins Commission, 1947, p. 1) that freedom of the press was in danger for three reasons. First, although it had become more important to the people, the percentage of people who could express their ideas and opinions through the press had declined; second, those who had access to the press had provided inadequate service to society; and third, the owners of the press had “engaged from time to time in practices which the society condemns and which, if continued, it will inevitably undertake to regulate or control.” These problems were nearly unique to the United States at that time. Most countries had state-controlled media and most countries that are part of the world today did not yet exist. The problems reflected the reality of private ownership of the media and the traditional suspicion of the government that is part of the American ethos.

The Commission also recognized the continuing threat of totalitarianism (“We cannot suppose that the military defeat of totalitarianism in its German and Italian manifestations has put an end to the influence and attractiveness of the doctrine”; *Ibid.*, p. 4), and the new danger of total annihilation (“universal catastrophe”) made possible by the atomic bomb (*Ibid.*). What was required of the media was assistance in helping “create a world community by giving men everywhere knowledge of the world and of one another, by promoting comprehension and appreciation of the goals of a free society that shall embrace all men” (*Ibid.*).

The Commission acknowledged that a free press was essential to political liberty and that civilized society “must guarantee freedom of expression, to the end that all adventitious hindrances to the flow of ideas shall be removed” (*Ibid.*, p. 6). The government must refrain from intervening to control the press and those who owned the press must operate responsibly: “The complexity of modern industrial society, the critical world situation, and the new menaces to freedom which these imply mean that the time has come for the press to assume a new public responsibility” (*Ibid.*, p. 17). Using terminology that Berlin would later take up, the Commission said that “freedom of the press means freedom from and freedom for. The press must be free from the menace of external compulsions from whatever

source. . . . The press must be free for the development of its own conceptions of service and achievement. It must be free for making its contribution to the maintenance and development of a free society. This implies that the press must also be accountable” (Ibid., p. 18).

What society required from the press, the Commission said (Ibid., pp. 20–21), was, “first, a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning; second, a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; third, a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in society to one another; fourth, a method of presenting and clarifying the goals and values of the society, and, fifth, a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, thought, and feeling which the press supplies.” Specifically, the Commission said:

“The first requirement is that the media should be accurate. They should not lie.” (p. 21)

“The second requirement means that the great agencies of mass communication should regard themselves as common carriers of public discussion.” (p. 23)

Third, “the images repeated and emphasized [should] be such as are in total representative of the social group as it is. The truth about any social group, though it should not exclude its weaknesses and vices, includes also recognition of its values, its aspirations, and its common humanity.” (pp. 26–27)

Fourth, “the agencies of mass communication are an educational instrument, perhaps the most powerful there is; and they must assume a responsibility like that of educators in stating and clarifying the ideals toward which the community should strive.” (pp. 27–28)

Finally, “the amount of current information required by citizens in a modern industrial society is far greater than that required in any earlier day. [Leadership chosen freely by citizens] does not alter the need for the wide distribution of news and opinion.” (p. 28)

(Hutchins Commission, 1947)

The Commission recognized the technological revolution in media that had opened up new channels for communication (Ibid., pp. 30–36). However, despite this, it said “the number of units has declined” (Ibid., p. 37). Concentration of ownership and media monopolies were increasing: “Monopolistic practices, together with the cost of machinery and the momentum of big, going concerns, have made it hard for new ventures to enter the field of mass communication” (Ibid., p. 49). Finally, the press’s performance was problematic: “The news is twisted by the emphasis on firstness, on the novel and sensational; by the personal interests of owners; and by pressure groups” (Ibid., p. 68).

Social Responsibility in a Global Context

The Commission’s report was clearly a post-Enlightenment document, which leads to the issue of whether its expectations of the media have any useful applications in other contexts. As we have seen, the post-Enlightenment expectation of free expression has found endorsement more globally – although not universally – but has the expectation of socially responsible free expression also found endorsement?

Although it may not be the type of endorsement sought, it is clear that many countries have used the expectation of a socially responsible media to their own advantage in an effort to exercise social and political control. The Egyptian prosecution of Al-Jazeera journalists for their presumed support of

the Muslim Brotherhood, and thus aiding terrorists, is one example. The Iranian government's shutdown of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook is another. In Pakistan at a meeting organized at Punjab University, Dr. Mehdi Hassan claimed that media reports should not be biased, misleading, or false, while other participants in the conference said that news stories should be reported accurately and only after verification (Pakistan Today, 2014). In Zimbabwe Deputy Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services Supa Mandiwanzira told delegates at a World Press Freedom Day that "press freedom comes from responsible journalism and that is what we expect from media practitioners" ("Media reform needs wide consultations – Mandiwanzira," 2014).

In China the government watchdog banned the television programs "The Big Bang Theory," "NCIS," "The Good Wife," and "The Practice" (all U.S.-made shows) because it claimed these programs violated Article 16 of state regulations on internet audiovisual products. This Article prohibited programs that "harm the nation's reputation, [and] mislead young people to commit crimes, prostitution, gambling or terrorism" (Coonan, 2014b). In Ghana the Executive Director of Africa Centre for Energy Policy, Dr. Mohammed Amin Adam, called on journalists to hold the government there accountable for its disbursement and use of the nation's oil revenue: he urged them to hold all stakeholders involved accountable by engaging in investigative research to assure transparency and accountability (Tandoh, 2015). In the United Kingdom, a new media oversight commission has been established in the wake of the hacking scandal in which media were hacking into mobile telephone accounts in the quest for stories.

All these examples demonstrate that the expectation for social responsibility is more general than particular to the United States.

Social Responsibility and Technological Change

The second issue requiring attention is that of technological change. When the Hutchins Commission wrote its report the dominant media were print and radio. Their influence, however, has waned with the arrival of television, the internet, and Web 2.0. So are the claims about consolidation and monopolization of information as the Commission saw them in 1947 still true 70 years later?

The development of the internet has not only provided access for hundreds of millions of people around the world to news and entertainment materials they could never have retrieved before, but also provided unparalleled ability for them to create their own content: videos on YouTube, music on SoundCloud, opinion blogs on Blogger, WordPress, and Tumblr, personal interests on Pinterest and news on Facebook, business or personal messages on email or SnapChat, news reports on CNN and MyNews, and so on. This would seem to suggest that the bottleneck that limited expression to a few in the 1940s has been broken. To a degree, this is true. However, the penetration of the internet globally is barely over 50% of the global population in 2016, and of these global users the top 20 countries provided 55% of the total number of users.² The penetration of mobile telephones is far higher, at 93% of the global population, but the slow speeds of service and general lack of infrastructure means that far less than half of these users can access the internet. While the internet penetration in North America is 81% and in Western Europe 78%, the penetration in Central America is only 34%, in Africa 18%, and in South Asia 12%. The worries of 1947, in other words, are still relevant in large parts of the world.

In addition, even in societies that have high percentages of their populations connected to the internet, or who can access satellite television or local radio, or who own mobile telephones useful for various purposes, there continues to be the issue of systems-ownership. Many newly connected

Facebook users in the developing world, for instance, don't understand the undergirding economic profit system that drives its services. They haven't been introduced to surveillance activities, threats to privacy, or the monetization of their "eyeballs." They think of it as a "free" system for connection, not one that wrings profit from virtually every choice they make. All systems that provide some form of connectivity to people exact a price for it, and in many cases that price is not known until long after decisions are made by users and then it's too late to effectively withdraw. People are lured into use without the requisite knowledge to resist.

The second aspect of the Hutchins Commission's critique was concentration of ownership. The fewer media owners there were, it reasoned, the less freedom of expression would exist. The concentration the Commission feared has only strengthened in the past 70 years. In 2010 Timothy Wu concluded that "most of the phone system was back in the hands of Bell, and its competitors were being steadily run down. A gang of conglomerates comfortably controlled film, cable, and broadcasting. And while this new order was by no means absolute, the industrial concentration had reached levels not seen since the 1950s" (Wu, 2010, p. 255). He also wrote that the concept of net neutrality, which required that all traffic, from whatever source, have equal access to bandwidth, was under siege by corporations such as Google and Apple, finally concluding that, despite Apple's carefully cultivated reputation as an innovator, its devices "are a betrayal of the inspiration behind that pathbreaking device [the original Apple II], which was fundamentally meant to empower its users, not control them" (Ibid., p. 292).

Although Wu's analysis was restricted to the United States, it is not difficult to find others who have reached similar conclusions elsewhere:

Net Neutrality is digital freedom. Mandating it is vital. Unrestricted online access is the only way to stay informed. It's a vital source for real information. It's free from state or corporate control. It's been this way so far. Public interest groups want it preserved. Everyone has the right to demand it. It's too precious to lose. Giant telecom and cable companies want control. They want toll roads established. They want higher priced premium lanes. They want unrestricted pricing power. They want license to steal. They want content restricted. They want the right to censor. They want dissent crushed. They want independent thought eliminated. They want digital democracy destroyed. Net Neutrality denies them. They spent enormous amounts contesting. They want total Internet control.

(Centre for Research on Globalization; Lendman, 2014)

"Western dominance is one of the biggest challenges for developing nations," says Alice Munyua, a researcher and policy development expert, representing Kenya and Africa on forums such as ICANN [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers]. "It is a big concern for African governments and stakeholders, and not just because of how the internet is governed, but how it is developed from a commercial and technical perspective," she said. "There is a feeling that we are not able to participate or contribute effectively because of the lack of capacity, skills and resources, so there's a digital divide in terms of access, but also in appropriating the internet for our own development."

(Kiss, 2012)

In many respects, then, despite the enormous technological changes that have affected media since 1947, the situation remains basically the same.

Discussion Questions

- 1 It has long been an article of faith in Western nations that a free press is necessary for democracy to thrive. Is this true or can democracy thrive in situations where the press is owned by, or heavily censored by, the state?
- 2 Does corporate control of the media guarantee freedom of expression? Does it enable the “watchdog function” of the press, or merely create new concerns for free expression?
- 3 Does social responsibility matter when it comes to the operations of media companies? Can they be trusted to exercise it?

Notes

- 1 ISIS is also referred to as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and the Islamic State (or Caliphate as its adherents contend), and indigenously Da’ish.
- 2 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top20.htm>. Accessed February 11, 2017.