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Why Media Ethics Still Matters

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Journalists who work for British tabloid or midmarket newspapers, which have nearly four-fifths of circulation in Britain,[1] are trusted to tell the truth by less than a quarter of its population (10% for tabloid journalists, 22% for journalists on the midmarket press). It is small comfort that less than a third of people in Britain trust leading politicians, trade union leaders, or senior civil servants. Only BBC news journalists are trusted to tell the truth by a majority of Britain's population, although trust in them also fell drastically between 2003 and 2010 (Kellner 2010). And yet it is taken for granted that free media are essential to a working democracy.

There is more than a hint of paradox here. Media's freedom to publish does not automatically aid democracy: What if media regularly publish lies or untruths, as so many of the British population believe or suspect? As philosopher Onora O'Neill puts it, "the press has no licence to deceive; and we have no reasons to think that a free press needs such a licence" (O'Neill 2002: 100). The paradox goes further, since an untrustworthy media cannot provide a secure basis for trusting other public figures or processes. As O'Neill notes, "if we can't trust what the press report, how can we tell whether to trust those on whom they report?" (O'Neill 2002: 90). There is easily enough provocation here toward the development of a rigorous framework of media ethics, and indeed codes of journalistic ethics have existed for more than a century in many countries (Bertrand 2000).

I want, however, to argue in this chapter that the status of media ethics in media research is, in many respects, problematic and in need of robust defense. This is for at least two reasons. First, there is the increasingly ambiguous status of institutional media themselves within the proliferating complexity of the digital media age; second, and connectedly, there is the rising demand for a broader ethics of communication that would give no special prominence to the ethical problems raised by institutional media. The best response, I suggest, is to develop a media ethics that is flexible enough to provide starting points for new debate, and not

merely the reaffirmation of old rules and norms. Making this argument will bring out the special contribution of the philosophical tradition of *ethics*, by contrast with other approaches to the normative sphere, such as deontology. The distinction is important, although sometimes blurred in debate about media norms: By "ethics" I mean normative discourse focused on issues of the good and dispositions aimed at the good (virtue), while by "deontology" I mean normative discourse focused on duties (for a sharp treatment of the contrast, see Ricoeur 2007). Getting this distinction clear and so getting clear about the distinctive contribution that an ethics approach can bring to the normative dilemmas posed by media practice may, in turn, lay the foundations for a more robust communication ethics over the longer term.

Some Background

It might seem strange to anyone who followed, whether in Britain or internationally, the phone-hacking scandal that engulfed News Corporation in 2011, to say that media ethics needs justifying or defending as a topic. What could be more obvious than that practices at the media corporation in question needed to be more ethical? Indeed it is striking when no less a figure than Rupert Murdoch is forced to acknowledge in public the paradox mentioned earlier of democracy relying on an unreliable press. But that is exactly what he did when in a full-page advertisement printed in Britain's newspapers on 16 July 2011 he wrote that "The *News of the World* was in the business of holding others to account. It failed when it came to itself." And yet what has followed the phone-hacking revelations is not clear action to clean up the media and root out unethical practice: Practical proposals are still awaited and an inquiry led by Lord Leveson will sit for many months in an attempt to find a way forward. Existing journalistic codes and the weak "self-regulation" that is supposed to enforce them (overseen by the toothless Press Complaints Commission) have done little or nothing to prevent unethical practices from occurring. One key reason, as Angela Phillips already noted before the scandal broke, is that the *practical* conditions of working journalists are increasingly inimical to ethical practice (Phillips 2011). As yet, there are no clear starting points of media ethics for putting this right. There is no public consensus around the specific ethical expectations we can legitimately have of journalists in a democracy. This suggests that the problems raised by the contemporary practice of journalism are deep, and not susceptible to simple fixing by codification.

An abyss threatens to open up in Britain where people have minimal reasons to trust media, and so have minimal reasons to trust anyone else in the public world. Public life in general becomes irreversibly corroded. Fatalism about the limits and weaknesses of the media ("that's the media for you!") is a standard response, but offers no solution; indeed by normalizing mistrust in media it intensifies the problem, so blocking any ways forward.

An alternative approach, following Paul Ricoeur, is to note that it is precisely when the complexities of human and social life throw up outcomes that are problematic and unsustainable that new forms of ethics have to be built. Ricoeur calls such turning-points "limit situations": As one example, he gives the danger to human life from medical care that is not careful about its own norms, so generating the need for medical ethics (Ricoeur 2007: 34–5). We have entered, I suggest, a limit situation today with respect to the practice of journalism, at least in a country such as Britain where the institutional conditions for producing what counts as journalistic output directly undermine the purposes for which we need journalists in the first place: to circulate information that is necessary for the good conduct of our common life together. As a result, a need – not just institutional or bureaucratic, but a deep social and human need – emerges for a media ethics that is focused in particular on the practices of institutionalized media production, and also is applicable to *anyone* who contributes as a producer or commentator to our public world. As the late Susan Sontag pointed out, in an age of smart phones and endless digital platforms for contributing to public culture, that really could be any of us (Sontag 2004).

On the face of it, the prospects for such a media ethics are good. Academic publications on media ethics have in the past decade broadened out from the field's pioneers (Christians, Ferré, and Fackler 1993, Christians, Rotzoll, and Fackler 1991) who emerged in the context of the long-standing tradition of ethical debate in US journalism schools (Zelizer 2011) to a broader range of authors in a number of countries: Pinchevski (2005), Couldry (2006: chapter 8), Silverstone (2007), Ward and Wasserman (2008), Phillips (2011). This current book is itself evidence of a growing international debate about the frameworks for media ethics.

In addition, as digital media's role in the texture of our lives has become increasingly apparent with the installing, for example, of social media platform "apps" on our smartphones, concerns have started to be raised by prominent analysts or pioneers of the digital revolution about its ethical consequences. Sherry Turkle's 2011 book *Alone Together* is a prolonged meditation on whether our relations with digital technology are "offering us the lives we want to lead," a profoundly ethical question (Turkle 2011: 17); while virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier's book *You Are Not a Gadget* (Lanier 2011) asks searching questions about whether the growing drive to put more and more of our lives online and to rely increasingly on digital systems for conducting and managing our lives is a positive trend.

The underlying point can be put quite simply. We no longer have a way of living together – of conducting any domain of life – *without* media but we don't yet know how to live *well* with media. Using Habermas's in some ways outdated dichotomy between "lifeworld" and "system," there is no lifeworld any more that is not saturated at every level by system, including the systems that are "media." However, systems are not places within which we can live. The intense functional determination of systems means

that, of themselves, system spaces are incompatible with any tolerable life. The point is not that system has *no* role in a life lived well, but rather that a life *saturated* with system injunctions quickly becomes intolerable.

It is tempting at this point to conclude that the increasing recruitment of all of us as information producers and circulators in a vast hypertextual universe requires us to bypass media ethics and concentrate on building a broader *communication* ethics in which the issues of institutional media play a smaller role. Certainly there are many ethical issues raised by everyday use of digital platforms which do not derive from the constraints of journalistic practice. For example, mutual coveillance penetrates ever deeper into everyday practices of work, identity, and sociality, and we leave archive trails of our lives (with uncertain ethical consequences) on social networking sites and wherever we buy or observe anything (Andrejevic 2008, Zittrain 2008: 219–20, Turkle 2011). Meanwhile there are sweeping arguments that, in the digital age, the old separation of producer and audience disappears, so that all of us become "produsers" of one sort or another (Rosen 2006, Bruns 2008). If so, do we require a common ethical framework whose starting points cannot be the partic-ular conditions of those still *paid* to be journalists or image producers? The uncertainties affecting the digital media are multiple, including the economic viability of large-scale media operations and their continued social status and legitimacy versus the growing status and legitimacy of decentered social networks online (Couldry, 2012: chapter 1).

At the most basic level, we might conclude that, since we no longer straightforwardly know what "media" are, the whole project of *media* ethics should be dropped in favor of a broader communication ethics that has little contact any more with journalism ethics. That at least is the implication of some recent invocations of communication ethics which make no reference to issues of journalism (Hayles 2009, Stiegler 2009). But that, I believe, would be a profound mistake. In the rest of this chapter I want to defend both the necessity of media ethics and its generative importance for the emergent field of communication ethics. I will do so by putting emphasis on both words in the term "media ethics," arguing first for the distinctive contribution of *media* ethics and second for the usefulness of media *ethics* (as opposed to other philosophical approaches to media-related norms), for grasping the practical dilemmas with which the media and communication platforms (Gillespie 2010) of the early twenty-first century confront humankind.

The Need for *Media* Ethics

Truth seeking is a value for *all* effective forms of human organization, whether or not organized along democratic lines: Without practices aimed at truth (of which media are among the most important), co-operative human activity and the fulfillment of individual capabilities are impossible.

My argument's implications are, however, particularly sharp for those societies that claim to be democracies, such as the United States and Britain, since, as Sheldon Wolin (2008: 263) notes, "it seems paradoxical to say that democracy should deliberately deceive itself."

Notwithstanding the expanding role of commentary and "user-generated content" in digital cultures (Couldry 2012: chapter 2), most information we receive about the events and processes – governmental, economic, environmental, social – affecting our lives are institutionally produced. The emergence of media institutions (or "the media") is virtually universal in human societies during modernity, but with varying relations to government, markets, and civil society (Starr 2004, Hallin and Mancini 2004). It follows that the overall consequences of such institutions for truth seeking and truth finding are an issue of potential ethical significance for any such society.

The irreducible importance of ethical norms for media institutions has recently emerged particularly sharply at the global level. A global scale implies a space of irreducible moral disagreement and diversity. Media do not reduce or resolve such disagreement: On the contrary, they bring it into view. So an initial question is: How can we live *sustainably* with each other through media, even though media unavoidably expose us to our moral differences? Bruno Latour (2004: 40) expresses the challenge with great clarity:

> An entirely new set of questions has now emerged [on the political stage]: "Can we cohabitate with you?" "Is there a way for all of us to survive together while none of our contradictory claims, interests and passions can be eliminated?" . . . "What should now be simultaneously present?"

We do not need a set of explicit rules about media practice, but a framework of thinking that can build, at a global level, shared norms and values in relation to media practice in spite of our differences.

We need not, however, only look at the global scale. *Any* large-scale form of human organization raises ethical complexities. Media are one of the ethically significant "practices" in which humans are involved, at least when they organize on a large scale. Our formulations of a specific ethics of media must be shaped by the distinctive human needs that media can fulfill and the distinctive harms that media can cause: respectively, the need for information and the harm of misrecognition, or lack of recognition.

There are at least three reasons why we need a distinctive *media* ethics. First, there is no ethics distinctive to a single medium, because media narratives – always to some degree, and emphatically now, in the digital age – involve references to other media content, often in different media formats (Hepp 2010). Second, media ethics is broader than journalism ethics, by which I mean the already partly codified rules for institutionally empowered storytellers (journalists). Such codes are important and they have ethical content, but they emerge from particular institutional

circumstances; instead I want to explore how far a *general* ethics of media can be built that is, in part at least, independent of the particular institutional contexts in which journalism now finds itself. That broader media ethics would consider the general issues that media as a human practice raises for *anyone* involved in it, whether working in an institution or not. Such an ethics would be derived from considerations of media's potential contribution to human life.

Third, there is still a need for a *media* ethics, as distinct from a general ethics of communication, that is, the distinctive ethical issues raised by the institutional concentration of communicative resources that we call "media" (even still "the media"), and the deeply embedded expectations we have of such institutions and our interactions with them. Those issues do not disappear just because we now receive and make media across some of the same platforms on which we present our personal lives to our family and friends.

It can be argued, for some countries such as the USA, that an ethics of journalism was already embedded within that practice from the start, as journalism's role in sustaining a large-scale society was increasingly interrogated from the late nineteenth century onwards (Zelizer 2011). But it can equally be argued, by reference for example to the contemporary conditions of journalism in Britain, that the *absence* of effective ethical norms is more usual because of the growing difficulties of funding and organizing intensive news gathering and news production.

Two simultaneous trends increase those difficulties. First, there are the proliferating possibilities for producing and circulating (even recirculating) information or opinion about public events and matters of public interest, which in turn makes *economically* viable operations particularly difficult to achieve. As Terhi Rantanen asks, does the constant availability of news-like "information" make it "more and more difficult to make a profit from general news services"? Does this presage perhaps a return to the mass of undifferentiated "new stories" that characterized the world before "news" was invented (Rantanen 2009: 129–32)? Second, there are the growing complexities of the social process itself, the processes on which media must report. Social life itself is increasingly saturated by new forms of information production and information storage at all levels, whether official or unofficial (Bimber 2003). Organizational and governmental work is characterized by increasingly complex interrelations and systemic interdependencies at and between all scales (Elias 1994, Sassen 2006). As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult, without the backing of major economic investment, for *anyone* to know continuously what are the appropriate sources for understanding or reporting any process, or indeed on what scale, or from where, one should operate to get the least misleading view of what is going on. How, for example, can the truth about the arms industries or pharmaceutical industries be discovered without institutions that sustain investment in news gathering?

This is not to deny the increasing role of noninstitutional researchers in specialist understandings of what is going on in the world: the rise of what John Keane (2009) calls "monitory democracy." But that does not outweigh the pressure to maintain *some* effective institutional forms of information production – for governments, corporations, social groups – and the ethical issues that such forms of production raise. We need as citizens to know that someone somewhere is committing what Bernard Williams calls the "investigative investment" (Williams 2002) necessary for effective truth seeking. Otherwise the opacity of the social world is guaranteed and the mechanisms of democracy are at best illusory, as the tradition of elite democratic theory has complained for nearly a century (Lippman 1925, Schattschneider 1960). The seriousness of such problems for ethics should not be underestimated.

The 2011 phone-hacking scandal in News Corporation is only an entry point to a much broader and more ethically complex world of compromise, underresourcing, system reliance, impossible deadlines, and business as usual. Recent studies of journalism practice reveal an alarming gap between the conditions under which journalists work in various countries and the conditions under which ethical action is possible. Let's leave aside more obvious cases where good journalistic ethics is in direct conflict with the demands of authoritarian power, and concentrate on democracies where it is generally supposed that government–press relations work well.

Drawing on extensive interviews with UK broadsheet journalists, press agency employees, and freelancers, Nick Davies argues that journalists in the UK "work in structures which positively prevent them discovering the truth" (Davies 2008: 28). This result is at odds with more optimistic views of where digital journalism is heading: toward more democratization and mutualism and towards less elitism, gate-watching rather than gate-keeping, a world of empowered producers. The problem is not that journalists have changed their values, since "for journalists the defining value [remains] honesty – the attempt to tell the truth" (Davies 2008: 12). The problem is that the conditions under which journalists work are not ones where that value can be consistently or reliably *acted upon*.

Davies links his diagnosis to wider global trends in an age of web-based journalism where stories from elsewhere get recycled in an unseemly form of "churnalism," resulting in "a global collapse of information-gathering and truth-telling" (Davies 2008: 154). Production imperatives – the need to get the story "up" in the quickest possible time, and maximize "hits" in an accelerated multiplatform news environment – lead to ever greater reliance on stories sourced from other journalists (Phillips 2011). Similar concerns about the US press have been voiced in recent years, for example in relation to the commercial pressures interfering with journalist practice at the *Los Angeles Times* (Carroll 2007). These pessimistic views are not by any means the *only* perspective on today's changing conditions of journalism in the United States and Britain. There is some plausibility in

the argument that more niches now exist for journalistic voices (individual or collective) to emerge *outside* the major institutions of journalism, for example citizen-reporters or bloggers (Benkler 2006, Bruns 2008): The pharmaceutical industry for example, mentioned earlier, has generated critical voices in the blogosphere (discussed in Couldry 2009). But given the sheer size of contemporary journalism's task in tracking a complex world and the investment required for managing that task, these more optimistic views seem to deal with marginal features, not the central dynamics, of journalism today.

The bigger story is about a seismic shift in the conditions of news production itself in *many* countries. Pablo Boczkowski, discussing the online Argentinean press, puts the paradox starkly: We face, he says, a "remarkable increase in the amount of news available and a perplexing decrease in the diversity of its content" (Boczkowski 2010: 6). A recent ethnography of German newsrooms (Boyer 2010: 6) is even more vivid, quoting one journalist who felt his engagement with the news was being "hollowed out" when his time was "occupied [in] filtering, sorting and selectively elaborating on an increasing mountain of incoming information" that leaves "little time to think."

All this cuts journalists off from the practice they want to conduct: It is too simple to blame reduced investment in news-making resources by distant and uncomprehending owners. *All* social actors are competing to attract journalists' attention and so influence the news cycle: The result is a virtually unmanageable flow. Content management systems (Quandt 2008) that stem the resulting flow only increase journalists' distance from the human sources that might provoke ethical reflection. These systemic pressures derive from multiple aspects of digitalization: increased economic competition between media outlets as they seek audience attention, the possibilities of symbolic production far beyond the newsrooms' walls, and reduced budgets for news-gathering. The newsroom has become in the digital age congested to a degree that undermines more than ever before the conditions of ethical reflection. And yet it was the possibility of a journalism oriented toward truth that was the original purpose of a free press.

Where the information circulating in a society that passes for its truth – about the economy and financial operations, about civic and social life, about the workings of government – is not trustworthy, there is a systemic problem far broader than the ethical lapses of a single individual. When no obvious solutions appear to that systemic problem, there is a limit situation, in Ricoeur's term, that requires new ethical insight. Not everyone would see the problem with contemporary journalistic practice the same way of course: The opacity of social life *benefits* those interests that prefer to work under cover of darkness. Quite apart, however, from the harm that is usually done to less powerful people when powerful forces work without public scrutiny, there is the danger to *any of us* from not having key information about our common conditions of life – the

state of the global environment as the planet heats up is the most obvious example – and so not knowing what we should do about it.

We can restate, more generally, Sheldon Wolin's principle quoted above that it surely is paradoxical to say that *any society* "should deliberately deceive itself." The problem of media ethics is therefore inescapable in all large societies with large-scale media. This is not to say that we have yet an ethical framework to address this problem or, even if we did, that we have any institutional means for enforcing that ethical framework. It is to the last two points that I now turn in considering the productiveness of a media *ethics*.

The Need for Media *Ethics*

The ethical deficit of contemporary journalism grows regardless of the existence of formal journalistic codes or general moral norms. The reason must be either that existing codes (and their enforcement mechanisms) fail to address this particular ethical deficit on the ground or that the basic conditions of contemporary journalistic practice – its financial, spatial, and temporal resources, the working rules and norms by which it "goes on" – are at odds with the very *possibility* of individual journalists exercising ethical reflection, so that the unethical nature of much media practice is buried under cover of "business as usual." It is the latter, more disturbing, possibility that has emerged from the brief discussion of recent literature on journalistic practice, and, quite separately, from the phone-hacking scandal. Perhaps there are *as yet* no relevant *working* norms adequate to the contradictory conditions in which journalists now operate in large corporations, often with minimal job security and horrendous time deadlines, and across multiple platforms. If so, it is clear that a way forward cannot lie *only* in the formulation of new ethical norms for journalism: Something needs changing in the material conditions of journalism themselves. But how can we provoke change in those conditions without the external shock that ethical challenge has the potential to provide? This normative deficit in the local or national newsroom parallels the normative deficit apparent when we consider media ethics on a global scale. The problem Roger Silverstone (2007) raised is how media can responsibly sustain and manage a global media interface between diverse peoples that overall secures peaceful interaction and mutual recognition rather than hostility and incomprehension. Silverstone's term for this multidimensional space is "mediapolis," but it is clear that there are no common moral frameworks or rules from which we can build the norms of the mediapolis. By definition, being global brings together all peoples, and there is no consensus in the world about morality or even about the rational framework within which moral questions can be posed.

A project of constructing norms for global media must therefore be indirect, building, if it can, from basic understandings of the power,

purpose, and potentialities (for good or ill) of global media on which consensus might be reached (compare Couldry 2006: chapter 8). There are no ready-made answers to what journalists should do when a story they believe is true and plausible will, if circulated more widely, be likely to offend other communities, perhaps not the first but subsequent audiences of that story. The Danish cartoon controversy (on which see Eide, Kunelius, and Phillips 2008) was an ethical quandary of this sort, disguised by its origins in the use of humor to make a political point, rather than factual statement. But such conflictual dilemmas can occur at any scale since so many places host multiple ethnic and other communities. Indeed this lack of normative consensus is, in John Rawls's review, inherent to the liberal nation-state (Rawls 1996).

What I am suggesting is that the partial indeterminacy (for now) of ethics for the case of globally circulated media may, instead of being exceptional, characterize normative debate about media practice *on all scales*, given the new complexities of circulation in the digital age. Media ethics is always therefore – whether we are talking about media that circulates globally like the Danish cartoon, or remains at a local scale – something we must evolve through collective dialogue and questioning, starting out from agreed facts, and only gradually expecting to build norms that might over time become the subject of consensus. All this suggests that the appropriate way of framing the normative issues and dilemmas posed by contemporary media is via the tradition of ethics, and not deontology. Let me explain.

There is a broad, if crude, choice to be made between the deontological approach to morality (from the Greek word-root for "ought": *deont-*) and the approach known as "ethics" (from the Greek word-root for "way of life": *ethik-*) (Ricoeur 2007). A deontological approach asks: How *ought* I to behave in this *specific* situation? Or, perhaps, how am I rationally required to behave in this specific situation? But an ethical approach asks more broadly: What kind of life would it be *best* to lead? And (given that): What kind of person would it be *best* to be? The difference between the deontological and ethics traditions has been exaggerated (O'Neill 1996), and their focus certainly at times overlaps. Reaching a considered view on the type of life it is best to lead generates principles about the types of behavior that should be pursued and avoided (often expressed simply in terms of dos and don'ts); equally, as Paul Ricoeur (2007, 1992: 197, 238–9) notes, questions of "ought" (moral rules) depend on a prior specification of what is "good" (the sorts of things that humans aim for). In writing about media ethics, I place less emphasis therefore on the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy which is primarily concerned with what in any situation I am rationally *required* to do, and more on the broadly Aristotelian tradition of ethics, as developed recently by philosophers such as Bernard Williams, John McDowell, and Sabina Lovibond. This tradition asks, more broadly and simply, what a good human life is.

The reasons for this choice derive from the specific aims and reference points of these two traditions. Kant, writing at the height of the European Enlightenment, was concerned to discover the moral principles to which a "good will" – *any* good will, however rationally embodied – would assent, on pain of not contradicting itself. Kant therefore puts great emphasis on the principle of "universalizability," which he expresses as follows: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (Kant 1997: 15). *Some* idea of universalizability is important in any normative framework (norms, after all, are attempts to identify rules for all of us, not guidelines we can apply to others but evade ourselves). But Kant's aim was very specific: to find laws of absolute generality that would be compelling for any "good will" under any circumstances.

Kant too was looking to build a normative framework from minimal principles, but his choice of what to exclude from view was drastic: First, as the opening sentence of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* states, he leaves out of consideration a variety of possible goods, insisting that "it is impossible to think of anything at all in the world . . . that could be considered good without limitation *except* a good will" (Kant 1997: 7, emphasis added). Second, Kant excludes from the considerations relevant to specifying rules for conduct all the factual conditions of everyday life which might, we would have thought, shape norms that make sense to us: "*inexperienced* in the course of the world, *incapable* of being prepared for whatever might come to pass in it, I ask myself only: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law?" (Kant 1997: 16, emphasis added). Work that draws from the thought of Emanuel Levinas, in a version of Kant's argument that bypasses the "good will," insists that all of us, regardless of our empirical circumstances, are subject to a prior and absolute injunction toward "the other" that is the only starting point for morality (Levinas 1989, Bauman 1992, Pinchevski 2005).

By contrast, the tradition of ethics starts out by reflecting on the kind of life it is *possible and good* for human beings to lead. Injunctions to do what is possible for human beings fall away automatically; so too do absolute obligations that do not, as practiced, fit into some wider notion of what type of life is good for human beings or, as it is often expressed in neo-Aristotelian writing, for "human flourishing." Neo-Aristotelian ethics takes as its reference-point not universal law, or a "good will" abstracted from the flow of human practice, but the types of lives – actual lives, fully embedded in the circumstances of the world – that overall it is good for human beings to lead.

The Aristotelian approach has a number of advantages for us in formulating a normative framework for media in a global age. First, it does not even attempt to specify what absolutely we *ought* to do, and so brackets out areas of disagreement (for example, about obligations to God or to humanity) where we *know* there is no agreement. Second, the Aristotelian

approach avoids the claim that it is ever possible to specify *in advance* what one ought to do in a specific situation, and seeks instead to specify the dispositions (or "virtues") that we expect of the person who is likely, on balance, to live a good life and contribute to a shared good life. What actually should be done in any particular circumstance is delegated, in the Aristotelian approach, to the discretion of the person who exhibits the particular virtues and, where conflicts arise between the requirements of different virtues, who exhibits the master virtue of "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom means being able to weigh up the often competing requirements and impetuses of different virtues in a complex factual situation. As a starting point for considering the vast and *contradictory* complexity of contemporary media practice, this is useful.

We get a clear sense of how neo-Aristotelian ethics might in general terms proceed from Warren Quinn:

> One tries to determine what, given the circumstances, it would be good or bad in itself to do or to aim at. These questions are referred to larger ones: what kind of life it would be best to lead and what kind of person it would be best to be. The sense of "good" and "best" presupposed in this noncalculative form of practical thought is very general. (Quinn 1995: 186)

Ethics is based on the idea that we can come to agree on certain general things about what a good life would be like without needing to pass through the seemingly more immediate question of how should I behave in this or that particular situation. That indeed is how the ethical tradition gets conversation going even when no consensus about moral rules seems possible or even imaginable.

This neo-Aristotelian starting point for any normative discussion asks: How should any of us live? It therefore looks for consensus around the shared conditions of human life, and certain qualities of a good life that flow from those conditions. Indeed, if one basic condition of human life is that it is lived not in isolation but with others, then any practical good life must involve elements that converge (things that are good *both* for you and me). The question "how should any of us live?" is given its point by the assumption that there are conditions which frame *all* human life, regardless of people's moral and religious beliefs, and that we can identify those conditions (including those we call "human nature"). Those conditions have consequences for our shared circumstances of life and the best general response to those circumstances that we *can* agree upon, *without* relying on a formal moral principle. The generality to which the neo-Aristotelian approach appeals has some similarity in its *outcomes* to Kant's categorical imperative, but it is reached by a different route.

In the neo-Aristotelian approach, definitive answers to the question "how should I behave in a situation of this exact type?" are delegated to the judgments made in practice by those with the right dispositions or "virtues." This ethics is guided by the eminently practical insight

that right behavior cannot be identified in advance, abstracted from the often competing requirements of specific contexts. This is what McDowell calls the principle of "noncodifiability": The range of answers that ethics in practice generates cannot be codified in advance (MacDowell 1998: 50–73, especially 65, 73). The only answers that ethics can provide in advance are to questions posed at a different level: What is a good life for human beings in the conditions under which human life is, as a matter of practical necessity, lived? And what are the types of stable disposition required of someone who will prove in the long run to have lived a good life, that is, a life that we would agree *contributes to* a good life for us all, lived together? Note also that we are not concerned here with identifying all the features of a good life, only some minimal features. The basic question for media ethics flows quite readily: How should we act in relation to media, so that we contribute to lives that, both individually and together, we would value on all scales, up to and including the global?

From here virtue ethics routes all normative questions through an investigation of what stable dispositions ("virtues") do each of us *need* to have in order for us to live well together in relation to media.

There is one further point to be made about how a neo-Aristotelian approach would think about the norms appropriate to media as a practice. While neo-Aristotelian references to "human flourishing" might seem very general, much of human activity is not general, but organized into specific types of practice. A "practice" as defined by Alasdair MacIntyre, a Catholic philosopher who drew heavily on aspects of the neo-Aristotelian tradition, is a coherent and complex form of co-operative human activity whose internal goods involve distinctive standards of excellence, which, if achieved, extend our possibilities of human flourishing or excellence (MacIntyre 1981: 175). Media, I would argue, are a practice in this specific philosophical sense. What we do with media *matters* for how humans flourish overall in an era where we are dependent on the exchange of vast amounts of information through media. Media ethics in the digital age involves *all of us*, not just media professionals.

We can now formulate the starting question for media ethics more precisely as follows: *What are the virtues or stable dispositions likely to contribute to us conducting the practice of media well*? – "well," that is, by reference both to the specific aims of media as a human practice and to the wider aim of contributing to a flourishing human life together.

Conclusion

It is only now, as I start my conclusion, that I am in a position to state what I see as the three virtues for media-related practice in a digital era. They are accuracy, sincerity, and care. My argument for accuracy and care, set up in much more detail elsewhere (Couldry 2012: chapter 8), draws on the work of Bernard Williams (2002). By accuracy I mean the disposition

to aim at truth and to make the necessary investigative investment to achieve truth. By sincerity, I mean the disposition to only make statements which match with whatever else I believe. By care – and here I go beyond Williams and draw on Ricoeur's (2007) work on "solicitude" and also, more distantly, on that of Roger Silverstone (2007) on "hospitality" – I mean the disposition to show care for the common fabric and spaces of interaction that media make possible.

I have left the specification of these virtues until last because the point of my argument has been not to defend any particular answer to the question of what dispositions we expect of journalists or anyone else who contributes to the practice of media people but to insist, at a preliminary level, that this is the right *type* of question to pose in relation to the normative dilemmas raised by media. My argument is that virtues (or stable dispositions), however we might specify them in detail, are the types of things we should be trying to formulate when developing a normative perspective on the conditions of journalism today.

It is here that the cutting edge of the media ethics tradition becomes clear. Far from claiming to start out from some accepted and already authoritative norm by which contemporary journalists can be judged, media ethics in the neo-Aristotelian tradition asks what, in today's factual conditions, can we expect that media as a practice *might* contribute to our possibilities of living well together and, from that starting point, how we would want those who conduct that practice – which could include all of us at various moments even if we are not journalists – to be disposed to act. I have argued that the very features of the neo-Aristotelian tradition that suit it well to provide starting points for media ethics on a global scale, where consensus over more specific moral norms *clearly* does not exist, suits it equally well to provide starting points for media ethics on a national or local scale where the time and resources for applying pre-existing journalistic norms clearly have been undermined, even perhaps eradicated. In both cases, we need a way of restarting the ethical conversation: Simply pointing to the rulebook (actual or imagined) in the corner is not enough. My wager is that the neo-Aristotelian tradition provides it.

This approach might to some seem rather tame: It will not deliver answers in advance as to what a journalist should do in a specific situation. But it will enable us to see that the conditions of contemporary journalism are in many cases *at odds* with living an ethical life, a life that can be valued. What greater provocation could there be to a more serious collective debate on whether the media institutions we have are the media institutions we need and, if not, what we might, in the interest of living better together, start doing about it? For that debate to begin, we must remain committed to the project of media ethics.

Note

1. Newspaper circulation figures in the introduction are from October 14, 2011: http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=1&storycode=48050 &c=1.

Further Reading

An excellent starting point on the paradoxes of contemporary public journalism is chapter 5 of leading moral philosopher Onora O'Neill's book *A Question of Trust* (2002), based on her BBC Reith Lectures broadcast in 2002. On the paradoxes of journalism's role in global politics and a global public world, a pioneering contribution is the late Roger Silverstone's last book, *Media and Morality* (2007). Important discussions of the growing practical difficulties of being ethical as a journalist are *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies's book *Flat Earth News* (2008) and my Goldsmiths colleague Angela Phillips's "Transparency and the New Ethics of Journalism" (Phillips 2011). An eloquent example of the growing concerns about the ethical implications of our dependence on and involvement with digital communications is Sherry Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011).

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