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A VIRTUE-THEORETIC ANALYSIS OF OBJECTIVITY IN NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract

Journalists are professionals and their primary obligations are owed to business managers in their respective media firms, members of the public and society in general. These primary obligations lead to certain considerations and other associated obligations. One of the most important associated obligations for journalists is considered to be objectivity. That is to say, journalists have an obligation to report the news objectively and the media coverage ought not to be slanted in favor of government or any public or private agency. Alongside, journalists themselves are expected to be objective to report the news in a neutral manner. In view of this, I examine a few virtue-theoretic implications of objectivity in news media to argue for the need for journalists to cultivate the virtues of objectivity and care to overcome conflicting views and opinions in news media to report the news impartially even while sharing a bond of attachment with the people in the world.

Keywords

Journalists, Media Firms, Objectivity, Care, Media Coverage, Virtue-theoretic Implications

1. Introduction

Every profession is an occupation but every occupation is not a profession. It means that a profession is an intellectual commitment of a well-trained person to do good to the people in the

course of his practice of profession. Journalism is a profession that demands a certain level of commitment from journalists in news media. The commitment implies that first; they report the news to the people objectively or impartially and second; they remain neutral or objective with respect to the news they report. However, it has been observed that since journalists are not only under an obligation to do good to people but also under an obligation to work for business managers working in media firms, who in turn take care of sales of news papers or ratings of programs. This is why; the connotations of objectivity for journalists as mentioned above get distorted. In view of this, I begin with stating brief ideas of ethics and virtue ethics followed by a few reflections on ethics in professions in general and news media as a profession in particular. Further, in the light of two claims of objectivity as mentioned above, I examine the ethical implications of objectivity for journalists in news media to spell the ethically correct outline of the virtue of objectivity for them.

2. Ethics and Virtue Ethics

The academic discipline of Ethics represents a combination of understandings of thinkers justifying values by way of their discussions of rational bases of quite a few mechanisms, for example, an account of virtues, maximization of overall happiness or the universal acceptance of one's principles of action and respect for humanity whether in one's own person or the person of any other. The discussions of rational bases of mechanisms basically address questions such as, "what should I do?" and thereby lead to moral justification of actions. (Singer, 1993, pp. v-vi)

Virtue ethics is one of the theoretical frameworks or mechanisms to justify actions in the course of living a virtuous life that is coextensive with living a worthy human life. Aristotle proposes a systematic account of virtue ethics in his well-known work *Nicomachean Ethics*. He argues all through his work that since being rational is a distinctive feature of being human, this should be the determining factor of living a good human life. The exercise of rationality in cultivation of virtues that are ways of excelling, habits, dispositions or tendencies enables a human being to fulfil the telos or purpose of being human and live a happy life. It may be noted, however, that Eudaimonia or happiness for Aristotle is not a subjective feeling of pleasure but a human condition of flourishing or well-being that is objectively attained in the world. (Aristotle, 1976)

The cultivation of virtues vis-à-vis condition of flourishing brings to the fore the primary role of character in one's way of life. Virtues or vices constitute one's character and since these are habits that are formed the way we act or feel. Urmson clarifies that according to Aristotle,

“excellence of character is a disposition to choose that is in a mean relative to us and determined by the right reasoning of the wise man.” And the excellence of character is an intermediate disposition towards actions and feelings and not a disposition towards intermediate actions and feelings. (Urmson, 1990, p. 36) Any deficiency or excess in one’s disposition towards his actions and feelings will reflect the vices of that person. It goes without saying that since virtue or excellence of character is a multi-track habit as it is concerned with choices, desires, values, perceptions and so on, it doesn’t take one or two instances of actions and feeling but a fairly long period of one’s life to judge it to be a virtue. (Hursthouse, 2018)

Thus we may say that any justification of values is based either on a comprehensive study of some general moral principle or a study of virtues. And such a study addresses us as rational human being that is independent of any trapping of local or particular socio-religious identities thereby enabling us to address fundamental ethical questions pertaining to our quest to do the right action or to live a good human life. However, with the passage of time, we have also started using various analyses of ethics in specific domains of human endeavors such as professions of news media.

3. Ethics in Professions and News Media

It may be noted that ethical studies on our quest to do the right action in a particular situation or to live a good human life do not simply exist in some books and journals but are deeply embedded in our day-to-day reflections on our actions and our lives. With the advancement of technological societies, such ethical studies are increasingly hold importance in the playing of various roles such as children, parents, teachers, friends, citizens, professionals, journalists etc. The reason being we apply ethical studies in the playing of a role, for example that of a journalist to understand the relevance and justification of values in a situation and to overcome a conflict among roles, if there is any. For example, it is good to learn to inform a newspaper reader but it is equally good to learn to appreciate a public figure’s privacy with regard to his family. Or else, it is good to comprehend efficient allocation of resources in business decision-making but it is equally good to know one’s obligation to acknowledge social responsibility in writing news accounts in a newspaper, or rights of stakeholders such as employee rights or rights of local community. In a similar vein, an awareness of ethical issues – as they are put forward in the study of media ethics, which is an example of applied ethics - such as truth, honesty, objectivity and care

in media, media and privacy, confidentiality and the public interest may help in the way of ethical analysis of a situation.

Such applications of ethics in particular human endeavors serve the purpose of making ethical studies tailor made with the direct involvement of ethicists and local area practitioners. This academic collaboration of ethicists and local area practitioners is taking place in many human endeavors, for example, environment, business, and quite a few professions such as media, education, law, medicine and so on that appear in the form of studies in Environmental Ethics, Business Ethics and Professional Ethics, etc. Professional Ethics in the given bunch of Applied Ethics is a rational thinking of ethical issues such as objectivity in news media even if there are laws of a country and rules of a profession and an organization to help its practitioner to arrive at judgments to act in the situation. The training in and habit of rational thinking helps a practitioner, a journalist in the given context, to interpret the laws and rules in the light of his understanding of objective ethical truth – the guiding force behind his judgments to act in a situation.

The demand on a professional to be rational comes not only from being ethical but also from being professional because the idea of profession conveys certain intrinsic elements such as extensive training that is predominantly intellectual, a spirit of service in the society, credentialing through degrees and certificates, organization of members belonging to particular profession as such and autonomy of the professional in his or her work (Rowan and Zinaich, 2003, pp. 56-62). These defining features of profession bring to the fore an elevated sense of duty in the working of a professional, which is why, in a situation of conflict, for example, between an obligation to his employers to increase their market share or truthfully report the news without any exaggeration to generate false public interest will of course favor the latter option.

Journalism is a profession. Journalists are professionals. They are expected to be well trained, truthful, fair, honest, caring and objective no matter whether they work in old news media such as print media or new news media such as web-based media (Mann, 2003, p. 400). They are assumed to work with a certain commitment to the people and society. They share information with the people to contribute in the effective working of the government and in general to generate awareness among people regarding their well-being in the world. In fact, ‘social welfare is the most important reason or purpose for the existence of media.’ (Thakurta, 2009, pp. 2-4)

Since every profession is an occupation, the occupation of journalists primarily is to communicate. ‘We may distinguish communication at intra-personal level, for example, thinking; interpersonal level, for example, within organization; and mass communication, for example, news

article in a newspaper. Media, a plural of medium - print, radio, television, cinema and the internet - of mass communications is all about reaching out to a large, heterogeneous, faceless body of people. It is interesting to note that while presenting news, media professionals gather information from the people and disseminate information among people. Certain pieces of information are characterized to be current news that are specifically dealt with in the profession of journalism such as 'gender crimes, exploitation of the underprivileged, indulgence of the affluent, arrogance of those in position of power and authority, natural calamities and man-made accidents, communal tensions and riots, conflicts and wars, acts of terrorism.' (Thakurta, 2009, pp. 2-4)

However, this information gathering for news accounts appears to be straight forward and looks easy on paper but in real practice of profession, media professionals in general and journalists in particular are sometimes found to be ethically incorrect in their approach and happen to adopt ethically questionable practices. They do, for example, cross the boundaries of privacy when they ought not to and they don't cross the boundaries of privacy when they ought to. Louis Alvin Day contends, "Some invasion of privacy is essential to the news-gathering process and a well-informed public. But the ethical dilemma arises in deciding where to draw the line between media professionals and the audiences they serve (Day, 1991, p. 128)." And Dennis F. Thompson in this connection informs that 'journalists should be interested in political virtues of politicians as for instance, respect for the law and the Constitution but it seems that the press is more interested in the sins of sex that are least closely connected with the political vices (Thompson, 2003, p. 397).'

It appears that violations of conduct occur as media professionals tend to go along with the government or the corporation in an attempt to please their employers to increase their market share or in simple terms to increase their employers' profit in a trouble-free environment and thereby secure their own material well-being in the practice of their profession. This practice continues in social media journalism as Roberto Adriani observes that "Journalists are evaluated by publishers (therefore their employers) also on the basis of how many interactions their articles get, since more interactions mean more advertising and more revenues for the publication. For this reason, journalists are more willing to write clickbait oriented pieces, in order to stimulate likes, comments and sharing. The final outcome is that today journalists are more Advertising sensitive than in the past, jeopardizing their independence."

However, Raphael Cohen-Almagor puts forward a counter viewpoint, "Journalism does not only mean increasing the sales of a newspaper or promoting the ratings of certain broadcasts. Journalism also means seeing people as ends and not as means – a Kantian deontological approach

(Cohen-Almagor, 2003, p. 388).” It further implies that since, journalists are responsible for generating awareness among people and in a way help them to be ethical in their behavior and decision making and not merely entertaining in their news reports, they are ethically required, first, to report the news to the people in an impartial or objective manner and second, they themselves ought to be neutral or objective with respect to the news they report.

4. Ethical Implications of Objectivity for Journalists in News Media

In continuation of the above, it may be noted that mass communication, political communication in particular, has to be effective in a democracy because democracy or rule of people requires an active participation of citizens that is closely based upon the fact that citizens are well-informed. And to make this happen in a significant measure, it is one of the major responsibilities of journalists to provide news reports to readers or viewers that are “accurate, reasonably comprehensive, and free from subordination to governmental or corporate power (Detmer, 2003, p 373).” Journalists by and large consider this responsibility as a part and parcel of their profession and do claim to be objective in their news reports. The journalists’ claim to be objective implies that they are impartial, balanced, unbiased, neutral and non-ideological.

However, it is generally observed that journalists depend on guidelines of the government for their news accounts on political matters. They regularly attend government-organized press meets and receive prepared texts on government policies and action plans to deliver the news to the public. And on most occasions they end up irresponsibly advertising uncritically government policies and action plans. Or else, if a country anywhere in the world is known to be a friend in government circles of their country, then they favor the policies and initiatives of that country in their news reports, and if a country is officially declared to be an enemy then they end up criticizing or high-lighting the pitfalls of its policies and initiatives, censorship of press in the country in question, for example. (Detmer, 2003, pp 373-375) More specifically, it has also been empirically analyzed in the context of US news media that the attention to foreign leaders “generally follows geopolitical conflicts and struggles rather than connections via international institutions, trade, or political similarity.” (Brandon Gorman and Charles Seguin, 2015, p. 776)

Detmer identifies three journalistic practices for irresponsible acts of media professionals, namely first, dependence on press conferences and press releases thereby showing lack of investigative reporting; second, sticking to objectivity thesis that reporters should present only facts but in reality that cannot be separated from judgments and conclusions, which implies these

all together come only from the consensus of mainstream political opinion; third, journalists are required to be balanced or objective in presentation of their news reports meaning thereby they ought to present both sides of every issue carefully but that in reality happens to be the report on common political views of political parties particularly in regard to their response to any policy or initiative of any other country. Such irresponsible journalistic practices often conveniently overlook the findings of the Amnesty International, the International Red Cross, the United Nations, the foreign press, the world opinion, and the judgments of scholars. (Detmer, 2003, pp. 376-377)

5. Journalists and the Virtue of Objectivity

Journalists may overcome such irresponsible practices by way of sticking to the following obligations in their aspiration to cultivate the virtue of objectivity to live a good human life: journalists may engage in more and more investigative reporting; journalists may enlarge their pool of sources of information as mentioned above; journalists may set their own agendas instead of merely following the government or corporate line for media coverage; journalists may adopt a scientific or scholarly conception of objectivity that is grounded in evidence and reasoning including thereby a correct interpretation of facts with the help of judgments, opinions, theories and conclusions; journalists may abandon presentation of ‘both sides’ approach and adopt a rational objective perspective that may include multiple sides or else the evidence may demand that only one side in the given context may be referred to, for example, in the context whether ‘smoking is harmful to health.’ (Detmer, 2003, pp 378-379)

In continuation, we may recall that the second claim mentioned above states that journalists ought to be neutral or objective with respect to the news they report. It has been pointed out above that it is not possible for journalists to stick to facts and set aside their judgments, opinions and conclusions. Similarly, it is not possible for journalists to be neutral with respect to the news they report. This is because, “an intelligent person will inevitably form opinions about some important moral and political issues. Even if opinion-lessness were possible, it is not a trait we ought to cultivate. Engaged and informed people naturally form views about issues that confront them, and journalists may be expected to do likewise (Lichtenberg, 2003, pp. 380-381).”

Journalists should not be neutral as they are well expected to form views or opinions but it may be noted that they should not be biased and there should not be a conflict of interest be that of money or personal relationships. They must be objective even if they possess opinion on a given

moral or political issue. Thakurta informs, "...this moderated form of objectivity might be understood as impartiality. Impartiality means to remain unbiased, to leave aside personal (highly subjective) feelings and opinions. No journalist can be expected to be completely impartial as everybody has particular preferences. But, the responsibility of being impartial requires that personal preferences be kept absent to the extent possible in journalistic endeavors (Thakurta, 2009, p. 46)."

We may infer that it is not an easy task to remain unbiased but somehow it is well expected that journalists have to learn to treat their views and news separately as they must keep facts free from distortion and exaggeration. It means they have to attribute and interpret statements carefully especially if they are political in nature. 'It also means they have to present pictures, quotations, and sounds in an appropriate manner despite the fact that they are free in the course of their news assignment to gather information, conduct interviews, click photos and do the requisite research (Thakurta, 2009, pp. 47-48).'

6. Concluding Remarks

It may be concluded on the basis of issues and concerns noted above that journalists are responsible for using media for mass communications whether it is print media or web-based media to generate awareness among people in the world. This further implies that social welfare is the reason for their existence but that somehow sometime gets overshadowed due to other considerations such as concern for increase in sales of news paper or public ratings of news shows. Or else, they come under governmental or corporate influences to act in such a way as to serve their interests. In view of this, it is proposed that since journalists are professionals, they ought to cultivate the virtue of objectivity to aspire to serve the interests of people. That is to say, they should act rationally to interpret facts in the light of evidence and accordingly form opinions, judgments and conclusions to help people to be well-informed and thereby to help them to act and live ethically independent human lives.

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