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Professionalization: Fusion of Media Freedom and Responsibility

John C. Merrill

[University of Missouri - Columbia](#)

ABSTRACT

This paper, **Professionalization: Fusion of Press Freedom and Responsibility**, proposes that journalism around the world is in a chaotic, fragmented, unethical, and largely anti-social state. Although communitarianism, and its media component—public journalism—is attempting to remedy the situation somewhat, the future does not look bright.

The paper hypothesizes that journalism is losing its appeal to serious, moral persons and is becoming simply another business enterprise. The “bottom line” has become the objective in the media world—not public enlightenment and social progress.

It has become evident that the gulf between freedom and responsibility is as wide as ever. This paper contends that there need not be an incompatibility between the two—that a free media system can also be responsible and qualitative. Under the present systems in the world, however, this is virtually impossible.

What is needed, this paper suggests, is a fusion—a dialectic that brings freedom and responsibility together. This can only be done by professionalizing journalism. In other words, making journalism a true profession—self-controlling and providing high standards—for the members of the profession. Licensing, yes. Entrance exams, yes.

Quality control, yes. A method of expelling unprofessional members, yes. Continuing education, yes. Mastery of a body of knowledge, yes. But all of these things would be done by the profession itself. No outside interference. No external control. The profession would be the authority. The profession would be free of outside interference. The profession would regulate itself, choose its members, and limit their activities. In short the profession would be free and at the same time would set standards and control itself.

The crux of the media ethics problem, contrary to much academic opinion, is simple. We have generally believed that ethical action can come only from autonomous or freely determined persons. We have come to assume that there must be no coercion of the mass communicator for ethics to kick in. Therefore if the communicator is under some kind of external control, ethics becomes a kind of non-concept, not applicable. And so arises the media ethics problem. It seems that freedom speaks louder than ethics. If I (or my mass medium) is to be ethical, it must be autonomous in its decision-making.

How we have fallen into such thinking is somewhat of a mystery. Perhaps it is a reaction to legalism, to governmental sanctions and law that in some countries dictates a form of ethics for the media. So law cannot be ethics, we are told. Ethics must be voluntary, unforced action. So naturally there is a tendency to confuse free action with ethical action. But even superficial thinking will dispel this notion.

Although such a notion could be discussed in great detail, it is important to emphasize early that freedom, as good as it may be, is often the impetus to harmful social actions, self-deprecation, institutional

irresponsibility, and general immoral demeanor. Self-control, of course, offers a beneficial palliative to unhealthy social action, but as history has shown, does not always result in social benefits.

Some readers may find that such a view is strange now coming from a person, who through the years has enthroned journalistic autonomy, individualism, and an existentialist, free-wheeling ethics. What can be said at this point is that, like Martin Luther King, one can go “to the mountain” and recognize reality and not romantic theory. Briefly what has resulted is a new tenet: Freedom is not the media imperative; responsibility is. . .

Global Fusion

Universality of common practice and ethics is an unrealistic expectation. But a common media format vis-à-vis government is a possibility. And, if the trinary objectives of freedom, responsibility, and quality are to be globalized, such a media format must, and can, evolve. A fusion of fundamental concern—that is what must take place. The convergence theory applied to freedom and ethics.

It will not be easy. For the egocentric and individualistic format is still seething about, flicking its ragged and often nihilistic sparks in all directions. Neoliberalism raises its head here and there. The importance of the group, of community, and public interest is still not generally accepted. Technology is fusing, but so far basic philosophy of the media is not. In this postmodern era there is the general sense that unfettered and unexpected—even anti-social—thought and action is preferred to a dull and predictable conformity. A kind of extreme libertarianism, reminiscent to some degree of the Anglo-French Enlightenment—exemplified by J.S. Mill and Benjamin Constant-- is bursting upon the world scene (among intellectuals at least), to some extent replacing the controlled and paternalistic Marxist philosophies of the 20th century.

Uncontrolled ethics. Individualized and personal, not socially normative—it’s still with us, infusing a kind of narcissistic halo on morality. It should be noted, however, that at the same time (as the new

century began) another trend made its appearance, first in America and then in Europe—
communitarianism. This new emphasis on social solidarity and cooperation has tended to neutralize (to
some degree) the opposing tendency toward individualism.

Coming: Communal Concern

This communal concern has shifted the rhetoric of media ethics, unimpressively at the moment to be sure,
away from freedom to a concern for social control and cooperation. Individual ethics in the media has not
proven very effective, and the time may be ripe for the days of uncontrolled ethical decision-making to
come to an end. Various voices in the recent past have spoken up, generally endorsing some type of
institutionalized, community-determined ethics.

Although heavy-handed government control in many countries discourages the development of alternate
kinds of civic or communal normative ethics, global reality is beginning to insist that there be an end to
individualistic ethics. For such an ethics has not worked. Uncontrolled ethics has not made the media
more ethical. Personal ethics has not spread to the media institutions, and public respect for the media is
at an all-time low.

This brings up the natural question: So if we need more control—some kind of ethical guru-ism—just
what kind of control will it be? Providing the answer to this question is, without a doubt, the principal
concern of this century. “Fusion” is the big word here. Coming together. Cooperating. Sharing. Thinking
of the good of associates, neighbors, others. The community’s interests, not just our personal interests.
How do we go about getting such fusion in journalism? How do we contribute toward communication
fusion globally? That is the concern of this conference, and will dominate media concern in the days
ahead.

Negating the Negative

What is needed for the media is a blueprint for the future—a kind of controlling mechanism that will ensure freedom and responsibility. But first we should stress that the media—in all countries—are superficial, arrogant, propagandistic, irresponsible, and extremely negative and obviously in need of some kind of disciplined and moral and quality control.

The literature of journalism is brimming over with examples of media irresponsibility. Articles and books spare no space in exposing the sins of the media, the arrogance of the media bosses, and the general loss of credibility found in mass communication around the world. Seminars, workshops, and lectures spew forth their indictments of a wayward press. Television, probably more than any other medium, typifies the vast desert of dullness and superficiality that dominates the world's media scene.

“Free market” journalism, some die-hards still say, will correct itself, will regulate itself, will gravitate toward responsibility. It will change to keep pace with ethical realities and with a kind of social Darwinianism will provide increasingly better fare for the people. But, unfortunately, there is no empirical basis for such a belief. People's needs are not the same as people's wants. By and large, what the media give the people is what the media say is what the people want—not what they need. The media, in many ways, determine what the people see as their world, see as their interests, see as the values of their time. The world is created every day by the media.

And it is a skewed and mainly negative world. A world of entertainment. It is an atypical and superficial world. It is a world inhabited by criminal acts, by disoriented and psychopathic individuals, by dishonest politicians, by immoral teachers, by drunken and drug-addicted trouble-makers, by sexual perverts, by insensitive paparazzi and privacy-invading journalists, by an unjust justice system, by acts of violence and terrorism, by unscrupulous national leaders, by arrogant plutocrats and immoral treatment of the poor, by

broken and dysfunctional families, by substandard education, by broken promises, and a whole variety of harmful social practices.

Realism is Not Garbage

This main (negative) media view of the world is a product of two main systems of journalism: (a) the authoritarian view—government-controlled—that news emanating from government or news about non-political superficialities are the needed ingredients of public information, or (b) the free-market view that negative, sensational, entertaining news is the best kind of public information—or at least the kind that best “sells.”

Both emphases are wrong. In the first, there is control, to be sure, but it is amoral (non-ethical) control that does not have the people’s interests at heart. It is egoistically conceived, propagandistic in nature, and designed to hide the weaknesses of government. In the second, the assumption that what is ethical is somehow what the media think the people want. News is therefore titillating torrents of superficial and stultifying snippets of useless information. In both emphases media messages serve mainly as narcotizing drugs to keep the populace drugged with trivialities and entertainment. An ethical problem? Most definitely.

In authoritarian countries the news is politically controlled, but in many areas ethically uncontrolled. In so-called libertarian countries the news is neither politically nor ethically controlled. So throughout the world today the storms of media information rage uncontrolled by ethical standards. Defenses must be built to keep these storms contained with reason and a sense of social responsibility that derives from “consensus-thinking,” not from postmodernist flamboyancy of the individual communicator.

Let us now turn to the ethical views that tend to result from a new concern with globalization, with the spreading and sharing of ethical values that impinge on the world’s moral thinking. This is not simply a

media phenomenon, but it is one of building communities, of establishing some common-ness—in short, of improving global communication ethics.

The Final Solution

The idealistic goal for journalism worldwide seems to be to have a media system that is both free and controlled. This would mean that the press would be free (or outside control) and at the same time held to high standards by somebody. Who would this “somebody” be?

The only answer that seems viable: A PROFESSION

Professionalization of journalism is a touchy subject. It is often seen as a tendency to shut out people from practicing journalism, an attempt to create an elite body. And that is considered a bad thing for the media. But to have a profession of journalism—a true profession—would assure journalistic freedom and institutional autonomy and at the same time would create a structure to insure high quality and morality among the professionals.

The profession would determine its own code of conduct and make its own decisions. Government or any other outside source would have no say in the editorial decisions of the professionals. But the profession would. It would have ethical principles that could not be breached by member of the profession. If they were, then those guilty parties could be kicked out of journalism—or “de-pressed” if you like.

Not only would journalistic freedom, then, be assured, but unprincipled practitioners could be eliminated. In addition, quality control could be instituted on a professional scale. Membership in the profession could be tightly regulated. Entrance exams and interviews could be conducted by professional committees, and licenses could be issued (by the profession itself).

Continuing education could be instituted, sabbatical leaves established, and the professional journalists could be expected to improve constantly in their areas of practice..

Call it authoritarianism if you will. It is at least authoritarianism by the profession itself. It does lead to an elite body that governs itself and corrects and improves itself. It would instill pride in the journalists, and form an institutionalized group that is organized around the belief that public service and group solidarity is vitally important.

Basics of Professionalization

A person to be a member of the Journalism (Media) Profession would be expected to obtain the following credentials and stress (at a minimum) these procedures:

Have a university degree (preferably in journalism/mass comm.); undergo an interview or interviews; provide samples of work; be loyal to the profession; subscribe to a code of professional ethics; participate in continuing education; submit to the profession's requirements; take a qualifying exam, and obtain a certificate or license from the profession.

Meritocracy would be a key concept for the professional. Pay and advancement would be expected on the basis of merit alone. The journalist would feel a part of a specially qualified, exclusive group—commonly educated and motivated.

The journalistic profession would have a way of expelling a person who practiced unprofessional journalism. Or, at least, such a person would be held up as a poor example of a journalist. The profession would have a special board or committee to consider such cases.

A professional code of ethics would be needed for institutionalized work. It would be drawn up by members of the profession or their selected representatives and would be ratified by the total membership. Through peer pressure and professional pride it would provide journalists with a common set of work policies and guidelines.

Control would exist for a profession of journalism, but this is internal control (by the profession itself) and does not come from an outside source. Every member of the profession would be licensed or certified by the profession.. This would usually be after an entrance or qualifying nationwide exam has been passed. A qualifying exam, designed by a special committee of journalists, would need to be passed before the journalist is licensed.

Journalism and mass communication have a basic body of knowledge which every professional journalist should master. Practical techniques, as well as fundamental sociological, psychological, philosophical, and economic information especially related to communication are especially important for the journalist. A study of the history of communication in one's own country, as well as a broad understanding of global media systems, is needed.

A professional journalist would be expected to have excellent writing and speaking skills. A love for, and dedication to, language would be essential for the professional journalist, and many people are, by their basic nature, suited to be journalists. And some are not.

The Essential Fusion

A recipe for better journalism has been proposed. Admittedly it is, in its broad concept, not new. But nowhere on the globe has it been taken seriously. Much talk is heard about "professional" journalism, but the core meaning of such a term is never really explored, nor is there a real resolve to professionalize journalism.

So what we have are media systems around the world either without authority and moral foundations or without autonomy and freedom. They are thrashing about, doing this and doing that, wallowing in relativistic bogs that give no real substance, direction, or purpose to their enterprise.

Journalism has abdicated its roots of news and news analysis. It has turned into a profit-making business not a public service. It has enthroned entertainment and not credible information and analysis. It has largely adopted machiavellian and not humanistic ethics. It is slipping away into the personalization and isolation of the internet. Worldwide It is in danger of becoming either a government bulletin board or an advertising platform, with a surfeit of entertainment to make them acceptable..

Fusion—not technological but philosophical—must occur to save it from distinction.

The way to such a fusion is through professionalization. Control and freedom working, not against each other, but together for a bright day for the world's journalism.