

# Towards an Ethics of Inclusivity, Fairness, and Balance in the Age of Pandemics

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## Abstract

A professional approach to journalism requires that media practitioners cover the various groups that make up a society with fairness and balance. In other words, the concerns and perspectives of people belonging to oppressed or marginal gender, race, class, sexual orientation, religious groups, or social classes should receive the same attention as those who are more privileged in society. While exploring media coverage of oppressed groups in the age of the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper argues that it is time to abandon our slide into relativist ethics in deciding who is worthy of coverage and return to our Kantian duty to cover all communities we serve with fairness and balance.

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## Introduction

Media messages have become ubiquitous in everyday life, bringing us local, national, and international information and images with dizzying speed coupled with often disturbing inaccuracy and DE contextualization. The new technologies allow these images and information to be collected at high speeds without passing through any human filtration or moral reasoning process. Machines handle most sorting and editing before humans can insert themselves in the editing process [1]. These same machines enable news organizations and social media to broadcast this information to audiences worldwide, often with damaging results for the audiences that reach. For example, Facebook posts from the extremist groups in Pakistan and India contributed to riots and deaths in both countries [2]. Similarly, misinformation about Boka Haram inflamed hatred between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria [3].

A moral relativist would likely suggest that the situations mentioned above could have been avoided by considering those societies' political and cultural settings and suppressing or censoring disturbing news, while a Universalist would advocate for telling the truth, no matter what the cost [4]. But it can readily be seen that approach, Universalist or relativist, must be carefully evaluated if news organizations and journalists are socially responsible in our profession's exercise.

Objectivity is a popular mantra for those who defend unfettered truth-telling. Yet creating a single set of norms for news coverage to be applied worldwide faces fierce hostility and resistance by

many journalists and governments worldwide. Some journalists advocate for relativism because it demonstrates tolerance for other cultures and encourages us to understand them on their terms while doing our work (Konstandin, 2020). This approach says that we cannot assume that mainstream American journalism ethics is the right ethics for everyone and allows for flexible approaches to the journalistic craft. It recognizes the intellectual legitimacy of various approaches to news coverage rather than condemning those that don't fit the standard model. On the other hand, those that argue for rigorous truth-telling argue that relativism is a slippery slope that will lead to a general disrespect for journalists, who, because of their selective approach to information dissemination, can no longer be relied upon to give us the truth we need to make informed decisions. The question faced by media ethics in the age of globalization is: How do we tell the truth while simultaneously rejecting a relativist approach to truth-telling?

This study examines the philosophical aspects of both the relativist and Universalist approaches to truth-telling. Then, the paper examines two examples of media coverage taken from Africa and the United States. The paper proposes that approach, taken alone, is flawed and suggests that a new approach is necessary, given the requirements that social inclusivity, balance,

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and fairness impose upon us in the age of Covid-19.

## Background

Some anthropologists have highlighted numerous practices that are considered normal in certain societies but terrible in others. Abortion, genocide, polygamy, racism, sexism, corruption, and torture are only a few examples. These variances and matters of cultural taste question the popularity of universal moral principles, as does the reassertion of regional identities has coincided with the rising globalization of communications.

Regional identities are reasserting themselves as media technologies become increasingly global, and moral relativism is increasingly appealing given the diversity of the human experience. Once most people in a given culture deem something good, it is considered good [5]. If one assumes that no culture is superior to another, cultural relativism becomes synonymous with moral relativism. In other words, the combination of cultural and moral relativism induced by modern mass communications may impede the adoption of universal moral principles for human behavior and the organization of human society.

However, the idea that there are no universally valid moral principles concerning an individual or cultural behavior is problematic since it leads to a standpoint of ethics, in which nothing can be objectively judged right or wrong. Moral behavior would depend exclusively on one's perspective or the perspective of ones' culture. According to Volkner (2021), it also fuels a subjective approach to what constitutes a fact. Many people, especially the younger generation, have already developed a skeptical attitude to both facts and morality. The Covid-19 pandemic has facilitated this trend through social media [6].

## Universalism and Relativism in the African Media

Much of the debate regarding the media ethics of African journalists centers on the absence of commitment to universal norms for professional conduct. Media professionals lack a set of axioms that would make accepting a bribe create biased news anathema. According to White (2010), any departure from such norms should be unimaginable given the public's need to trust in journalists' devotion to communicating truth. Nonetheless, a sizable number of African journalists and media activists appear to actively distort or conceal news, preventing readers and audiences from receiving the balanced, comprehensive information they require to participate intelligently in national political and societal debates. For example, News Wires (2019) pundits claim that news stories in the Nigerian press Nigeria claiming that candidate Buhari's planned to Islamize the whole of Nigeria spurred voters to re-elect him with a margin of some four million votes. Kimotho (2019) points out that if every journalist were to do their job adhering to the professional norms of independence, balance, fairness, accuracy, and completeness, the media system would be strengthened and perform its watchdog and surveillance function, eventually benefiting journalists by enhancing their credibility and respect. However, many African journalists lack the ethical training to understand the negative impact of unethical behavior both on the respect

granted to their profession and on the societies in which they live, he says.

Journalists are constantly grappled with what constitutes ethical behavior as they work through decisions to report messy and complicated news stories [7]. Stated that the ethical orientations of journalists are crucial in shaping their everyday work practices. The Covid -19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the journalism sector, providing a unique opportunity to analyse the ethical behavior of African journalists. According to Mawarire's (2020) study on ethics in the African media, vulnerable groups and marginalized communities have not received equitable and balanced coverage during the pandemic.

In media discussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, media personalities primarily focus on its impact on urban areas, leaving those living on the periphery of the economy and geography with less visibility in the news. Media institutions have been financially battered by the Covid-19 pandemic forcing them to slash newsroom resources while simultaneously abandoning the most demanding ethical norms, such as maintaining independence from advertisers, investors, and information sources [8].

Denying vulnerable groups' representation in the media discourse regarding the effects of the pandemic ensures that they will not receive the attention they deserve from their governments or international agencies, like the World Health Organization or the United Nations.

The number and frequency of journalists dispatched to non-metropolitan regions to report the issues facing the marginalized in society have declined [8]. This denial of voice and visibility of marginalized groups in the news diverges from good journalism ethics.

According to the U.N., journalism ethics are similar to human rights, universal and inalienable, interconnected and linked. Therefore, journalistic accuracy, fairness, and truth should be required universally by media practitioners, regardless of nationality [8]. The traditional practices of journalism have been upended by Covid-19 and require a renewed commitment to the basic principles of the profession.

Research done by the Advancing Rights Institute in Southern Africa (ARISA) consortium revealed that temporary measures such as lockdowns imposed by Covid-19 dented many gains in freedom of expression won over the preceding years [9]. Concerns have been raised by the closure of many print media outlets unable to replace the revenue provided by commercial advertisers and have also gone out of business [10]. Due to a loss of advertising revenue and income from advertising and subscription sales, few existing media organizations in Africa will survive the economic downturn induced by Covid-19. To survive, some media companies are laying off employees or reducing journalist wages by up to 50 percent (Internews, 2020). As a result, newsrooms are forced to operate on a tight budget, unable to fulfil their information and watchdog roles properly. Some journalists opt to take bribes to sustain their daily income. The young journalist who accepts the payment to cover up public wrongdoing is preoccupied with personal financial survival rather than the public good [11]. The relentless financial pressure of the

covid-19 pandemic forces journalists and news organizations with limited resources to pay less attention to rural women, youth, indigenous people, and other vulnerable groups.

In the debate regarding how to best deal with the pandemic, utilitarian's advocate selective isolation, while Universalists argue for a complete lockdown to contain the disease [11]. Most women in Africa that live in rural areas that men dominate have suffered disproportionately from the financial impact of covid-19 lockdown restrictions [12]. The voices of their suffering have been silenced by reducing media coverage of their plight in rural areas. Similarly, the media portrayal of athletes is mostly on their femininity and heterosexuality and not sporting achievement. The same has been the fate of indigenous people who remain voiceless in the discussions of the effect of governmental policies on covid-19 [8]. Instead of emphasizing the consequences of Covid-19 on minority groups and the implications of state interventions on these same disadvantaged individuals, the media focus on reporting on government figures and giving voice to government officials. This moral relativism in the practice of journalism means that indigenous people, women, and other vulnerable groups will continue to be overlooked as media concentrate on amplifying the opinions and voices of government officials and public officials rather than adopting a Universalist and inclusive approach to the practice of journalism.

### **Ethics and Media during the pandemic in the US: a reflection**

There is a genuine conflict, almost an existential dilemma in American newsrooms, about whether the press can reflect all of America, all the communities it is intended to serve, as the third estate wrestles with the tension of inequality in the U.S. Even before George Floyd, even before the pandemic, many people in American newsrooms felt unable to accurately report on the world they see and experience due to limitations imposed on them in terms of language, what they can say, and how they can say it [13]. The pandemic has amplified the awareness of social inequalities, and Black Lives Matter and other groups have taken to the streets. Media influencers and ordinary citizens videotape the police to see if they overstepped their limits. Some journalists and media organizations have taken the overt stance that law enforcement agencies need to be reformed and that official sources of information are no longer reliable [14].

For example, during the Covid 19 pandemic, the U.S. health department has urged people to employ non-pharmaceutical interventions to curb the spread of the disease. These interventions include disinfecting surfaces, quarantining, and maintaining social distance. However, according to [15]. Some people believe that they are immune to the disease and refuse to comply with such measures. With the increasing popularity of social media, some people have become inclined to adopt the opinions the friends and associates rather than medical professionals, while others align their actions with the opinions of political leaders [16]. They consider the Covid-19 mandates from the government to be an unwarranted restriction of their fundamental right of self-determination [16].

Forsyth's (2021) study suggests that individuals enact a behavior

based on their perception of its morality. Those who champion civil disobedience are most likely to be the key warriors on social media, protesting and curtailing free speech. Those who feel that mandatory healthcare regulations are an infringement on personal autonomy are more inclined to resist such directives.

Measures such as social distancing and quarantine in the United States increase people's time on social media. Prominent people such as politicians, musicians, celebrities have taken advantage of the larger social media audiences to disseminate information that suits their own publicity needs [17]. The greater use of social media has also reduced the amount of time people spend in live social interaction and exchanging accurate and verifiable information and data. For example, Naeem (2021) reported during the Covid-19 outbreak, some Twitter users in America uploaded photographs of empty shelves at Costco shops. As a result, more individuals began hoarding, putting pressure on retailers and suppliers worldwide. The dissemination of false information distorts people's notions of what to anticipate, leading to adopting contingency measures such as stockpiling and panic buying. Moreover, Su et al. (2021) say that media sites advocating free enterprise and private ownership publish biased and inaccurate coverage about COVID-19, which further contributes to misunderstandings about the potential Covid-19 threat.

### **The imperative for Universalist ethic in reporting in the wake of COVID-19**

As the severity and frequency of global pandemics increase, so does the need for accurate media reporting needs. In the wake of worldwide pandemics such as the coronavirus, accurate communication is critical in dispelling anxieties and uniting people worldwide in a common battle against health dangers [18].

However, a new wave of moral relativism is challenging our moral system's predicates. It states that disseminating any information is acceptable if a culture or subculture recognizes it as valid. Today's media environment offers individuals the chance to express their ideas globally whether what they say is rooted in fact. Capíková & Nováková (2020) claim that disinformation concerning Covid-19 has proven detrimental because it has resulted in the fragmentation of public opinion regarding the severity of the Covid infection threat. Such is the predicament we face in the age of a relativist approach to truth in the age of fake information and fake media.

As a case in point, it was disconcerting to observe how many U.S. news organizations swiftly abandoned their peacetime promises to independent, unbiased reporting as soon as the drums of war began to beat during the 2003 Iraq War [19].

Universalist ethics of truth-telling will encourage reporters, managers, programmers, and content makers to balance the pursuit of audiences with their responsibility to disseminate information that serves the public good. This requires a willingness to address collective needs instead of prioritizing individual or corporate gain. This includes increasing the frequency with use which the voices of marginalized groups are heard in mass media. The multiplication of social media platforms and channels is

arguably making it even harder to maintain the universal ethics in reporting essential to the maintenance of civil discourse in media [20]. Still, at the same time, it is providing a platform where those how have not been heard can find an outlet.

Crises are critical moments. When dealing with a crisis, we better understand our world's fragility and how to avoid disasters from happening again. Recalibration and innovation derived from first-hand experience in a crisis increase resilience. According to [21] in the digital transformation era, the Covid-19 pandemic may require a fresh approach from media and other digital platforms to the intrinsic social contract that media have with society.

The Black Lives Matter movement, which questioned moral relativism in the protection of the lives of Black vs. white citizens in American society, led to street protests in defence of a universal approach to accuracy in media reporting on acts of police brutality against Black people in the U.S., and the repression of people by their governments around the world. Who would have guessed that a Chinese video distribution site (TikTok) frequented by teenagers would be outlawed in the United States, the standard-bearer for individual self-expression [22] around the world, barriers to unrestrained freedom of self-expression are being built. According to Ward (2010), this is because today's news media must acknowledge a fundamentally heterogeneous, global community, where their reporting can have far-reaching consequences for good or ill. Humanitarian agencies, governments, and warring ethnic groups all get news via the Internet and rely on that information to inform their activities. A global ethic is required in a world where media discourse bridges diverse religions, customs, and ethnic groupings.

One way to do this is by establishing universal ethics for reporting issues of global significance, such as environmental degradation, global warming, and poverty, to promote intercultural respect and understanding. From an international standpoint, such reports should be accurate, balanced, and diverse. For example, suppose the reasons for unrest in the Middle East or a famine in Africa are not correctly reported. In that case, American readers may not understand how they can help alleviate such conditions. Biased reporting can also inspire ethnic groups in a given region to fight one another. Global media ethics is required to assist individuals in comprehending the world's enormous challenges of poverty, environmental degradation, technological inequity, and political instability.

### How would global ethics in media be different?

Media personalities are free agents in the public sphere. They have a moral obligation to ensure that their information activities are informed, respect diversity, and challenge tyrants and abusers of human rights. The fundamental commitment of professional communicators must be to serve the information needs of citizens globally (Ward, 2010). Journalists should avoid identifying themselves with groups, regions, or even nations. Local media and media influencers must expand their moral universe to include the large audiences impacted by their content and not restrict their thinking only to the needs of the immediate community they serve.

Journalists should work within a narrow consideration of ethnocentrism or patriotism because the impact of the local journalist is now global. They must use diverse sources and perspectives to promote an understanding of issues from a non-local perspective. This imperative calls for a universalist rather than a relativist perspective on our work. Jacquette (2016) argues that journalists cannot be expected to report all the news truthfully without a philosophical perspective on what constitutes truth. Truth and objectivity become the goal of reporting rather than catering to local perspectives and biases. In media, objectivity has traditionally been defined as the need to avoid bias against groups inside one's nation. Allowing chauvinism towards one's own country or culture to skew reporting, especially regarding international issues, has no place in a world in which we are all globally connected.

Journalists can provide a practical moral philosophical framework to consider the many shades of difference between morally permissible and morally objectionable journalistic conduct if they are encouraged to think more deeply about ethics in reporting the news [23]. Also, by being informed regarding the ethical debates surrounding news reporting problems, news consumers can better understand the tasks of gathering and disseminating news information and the challenging moral situations that professional journalists face daily. Truthful, fair, and unbiased reporting must include foreign sources and cross-cultural viewpoints [24]. Furthermore, the global reach of media requires journalists to be more aware of their and others' conscious and unconscious framing of international events. As civic journalists put it, the goal of global news reporting should be more than just making the public sphere run smoothly at home [25]. The goal should be to make rational discussion possible in an increasingly diverse global public arena.

A solid journalistic reaction to inward-looking sentiments, such as intense patriotism, must be rejected replaced by global journalism ethics. In times of crisis and instability, cosmopolitanism means that the fundamental ethical role of global media is not unquestioning fealty nor muted criticism. Independent, hard-edged reporting and investigations and analysis are required to serve the global good.

### Obstacles to implementing a Universalist approach to media reporting ethics

Social media are the primary source of information in the U.S. and worldwide [25]. According to Suci (2021), more than 86 percent of Americans reported that they receive news from their smartphones creating a reason to understand why there's persistence in the spread of fake news and information. While we may hope, even demand, that social media networks combat disinformation, there is little chance that Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube will ever achieve this goal. One argument is that monitoring practically all content would need full-time attention. Still, there's also the reality that these networks rely on continuing use by their customers and subscribers, who want to see what they want to see and hear what they prefer to hear [26].

The profit-oriented media managers also are not fundamentally interested in checking the information's credibility because they



are more interested in post clicks, which generate advertiser dollars. According to Suci (2021), posts get a lot of likes when they are outrageous: many people are willing to interact with a post without considering if it's real or not. These media platforms willingly sacrifice the integrity of information for profitmaking.

The challenge is to establish a universal code of ethics among journalists worldwide. A global standard for ethical behavior requires adherence to universal ideals, influenced by a constructionist approach to ethics. This would result in a set of principles and values that could be applied in most times and places by all journalists [27].

Under this approach, a set of globally acceptable universal values would be established through rational discourse. Thus, the correct way to build a universal reporting ethics is to decide upon a set of principles through a fair and inclusive deliberation process. The set of principles doesn't need to win universal acceptance - a goal that seems overly demanding given the world's diversity. The goal would be to create a list of principles accepted by the most influential and credible journalism associations and news companies.

Reforming media practices will be a slow and complex task. Demanding that journalists follow universal ethical standards will be a waste of time unless they are anchored by an institution that encourages global values in a newsroom. Gray (2005) asserts that indigenization (the extent to which work practices fit local contexts) poses difficulties for universalization. International efforts, which may rapidly turn imperialistic depending on what is portrayed as 'universal', could exacerbate the issues. Because of these challenges, some journalists will continue to criticize global journalism ethicists for being unreasonable in their expectations.

News organizations will undoubtedly have to provide education, skills, and the additional resources required to accomplish high-quality cosmopolitan journalism.

## Conclusion

The media have been a formidable player in times of crisis, as this epidemic has demonstrated. Audiences such as governments, funders, and philanthropists are more likely to sympathize with and support those organizations that support their interests. Suppose we believe that the media are watchdogs that keep authority accountable. In that case, it should be clear that media coverage of the Covid-19 epidemic cannot continue to ignore minority group perspectives and experiences and the needs of other marginalized people. Within a Universalist approach, such groups are likely to be kept voiceless in the formulation of government policies, including the construction of social safety nets like food packages and cash subsidies. Media influencers must carefully evaluate their narrative angles, whose voices, and experiences they are not representing, and the possible harm their declarations do to marginalized groups.

The core journalistic ethic is telling the truth while minimizing harm. The current pandemic provides a unique opportunity for this ethic to take centre stage through media ethics refresher courses and balanced and fair media coverage of the less privileged. Journalists should take a step back and reflect on their present reporting practices. Neglecting to cover any part of our communities fairly is unethical, whether on purpose or by accident. It leads to a breakdown in social solidarity and intercultural understanding and undermines the prospects for global peace.

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