EMBARGO

An Examination of the State of Ethics within the Field of Journalism

By:

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1945 the Empire of Japan sent 9000 balloons through a Pacific Ocean Jetstream to America. Attached to these balloons were bombs set to a release timer that would approximately release bombs over random American locations, striking fear and panic in the hearts of Americans. Unfortunately six lives were lost in May of 1945 to one of these bomb drops yet, the story has only recently surfaced in news media. The reason: the American government begged all news sources to remain silent on the Japanese attack, in order to keep the American people calm and, surprisingly, every news source across the country remained silent in respect for the American government.

Looking ahead to the spring of 2014, a man releases a story to the public and the press about a great ethical concern he had discovered. He purported that a female game developer and a journalist for a gaming publication had been involved romantically for a number of months. His claim was that the developer was using this relationship to ensure the positive press for her games. It was later discovered that the source of this news was an ex-boyfriend of the developer, and the claims he made were found to be unsubstantiated. The damage, however, was done, and gaming journalism has been reeling from the effects of the incident ever since in the form of the movement "#gamergate."

These instances show the varying and diverse treatment of ethical behavior in the field of journalism. In both stories, the relationship between the journalist, the source, and the audience is put to the test. Usually, covering things up is not considered to be an ethically positive action. Journalists, however, had to gauge whether a headlining story was worth unnecessarily panicking the American people. Gamergate is a diverse and hydra-like movement where anyone can pick

up the banner for any reason they see fit, but it still raises important issues of the relationship of journalist, audience, and source, and how such relationships should be conducted.

I care deeply about journalism. As a young professional who hopes to soon enter the field, I have become disheartened that the industry, which I have loved and aspired to be a part of since I was young, is in a state of crisis. Ethics is an important focus in any industry, but journalism is especially susceptible to the fickle and ambiguous nature of ethics. Journalists are placed in an interesting point between the source for their story, the audience for whom they write, and the truth. Journalist must always be responsible to all of these parties, and themselves, to report objectively and truthfully, while remaining professional and courteous. This responsibility places journalist in a place of great power, while at the same time being completely powerless.

While the original incident proved to be false, the issues raised by gamergate have marked journalism as a target for intense analysis and investigation. The ethical practices of organizations and individuals are being called into question, and the public seems to be asking if the field of journalism is acting ethically. Before the ethical status of journalism are questioned, we must ask what the ethics of journalism are. Are they concrete or abstract? Is there a universal consensus or do in-house manuals rule the field? The age of technology, and the ability to communicate instantly, has certainly affected journalism and the way information is presented which is why it is the perfect environment to examine the ethics of journalism. Humanity is still relatively new to the digital age, and industries the world over are attempting to master it and perfect it. I believe that in the flurry of organizations attempting to master the internet their true ethics and ethical practices are vulnerable to analysis and make them easy to research. In light of

this I will be using this essay to answer what is the state of journalistic ethics in terms of a digital age?

This question is certainly loaded, and requires a lot of unpacking, but my plan is to use a simple framework to help process and focus the mass amounts of data and opinions surrounding this topic. The Noetic Field theory has existed in some capacity in the scientific community for a while, but recently Dr. Andrew R. Cline of Missouri State University has redefined it to fit more humanities focused discourses. The theory focuses on four main parties: the knower (the journalist), the knowledge (original source), the audience, and the facts. I will explain the theory in more detail later but what this theory allows me to do when examining ethics and journalism is to see the categories and the interactions with each other, and to see if there are consistencies or contradictions from various professional and non-professional perspectives. It is my hypothesis that the reason ethical issues are so constantly raised in journalism is because the ethics are so loosely defined and considered that these incidents are bound to happen time and time again. Basically, that all of these perspectives will believe that concrete ethics exist, but examining all of these together will show that they do not, or at the very least are so generalized that they are practically useless for real world application. This paper will not seek to define or establish a code of ethics, but instead seek to see if such a course of action is needed, and if so, where we can start to solve the problem.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current research into my topic examines the effect digital tools, like twitter and blogs, have on the field of journalism. This research examines how the need for instant information has changed how journalist access, research, and present information. Personal

opinion has become a starting point for digital journalism, leading away from the classical fact-presenting narrative. Dominic L. Lasorsa, Seth C. Lewis, and Avery E. Holton's essay, "Normalizing Twitter: Journalism practice in an emerging communication space," examined over 22,000 microblog posts on twitter to discover what ideologies and practices emerged. What Lasora et al. found was that digital journalists had become more opinion focused, but also more honest and proactive about sharing their sources and how they conduct their work. Comparatively, the Twitter accounts of journalists for print sources were less likely to be transparent about their sources or their work ethic. Further, the digital journalists held a strong focus on their audience by sharing user-generated content, holding discussions with readers, and encouraging readers to write their opinions on the information. The digital journalists' counterparts were less inclined to hold relationships with their audience.

This discussion is supported and continued by the research done by Ejvind Hansen in his article "Aporias of digital journalism." Hansen examines the challenges that arise in the digital age of journalism. Some of the issues Hansen raises are that there is no room for the old news cycle rhythms, the, everyone-is-a-journalist problem, and the re-assignment of the role of a professional journalist. Hansen examines that the need for instant information requires the fast-paced, and quick-thinking, journalism that the digital world provides. This need, however, leaves no room for the delayed and one-way conversation of print journalism. Further, he examines the problems and benefits of the ease of access that the general public has to produce and solicit information via blogs, in essence becoming pseudo-journalists. Hansen examines, lastly, that the role of a journalist is, in essence, that of an editor, moderator, and curator, however, Hansen sees a new and necessary role for journalist. This new role is a new and position that is just recently

being seen as a need: digital journalist must find, examine, and inform on the blank spaces in current dialogue. The journalist, in essence, must become the advocate of the voiceless.

Martin Loeffelholz and Torsten Quandt's essay, "New Journalism, Old Theories," seeks to find a way to define journalism in terms of different rhetorical approaches. While their focus lies mainly in German culture and journals, this research will be used as a model on how to tie a theoretical lens into journalism. Their work takes various rhetorical approaches to see how each would affect and describe the ethics, practices, and perspectives of digital journalism.

Further research examines the ethics of journalism. Sandra L. Borden's essay, "Mapping Ethical Arguments in Journalism: An Exploratory Study," examines how journalists discuss, both professionally and conversationally, ethically-problematic situations. Using the principles of cognitive and argument mapping, Borden examines the reasoning and rhetoric of journalists in the work place. Borden draws connections between the more conversational discourse between journalists, and what actually ends up in print.

Heidi McKee and James E. Porter's essay, "The Ethics of Digital Writing Research: A Rhetorical Approach," examines how rhetoric theory and casuistic ethics, paired together, provide a framework for how journalist should examine sources, relationships, and make ethical choices. Their research gives a backbone to mine in how to properly examine journalistic work for rhetorical clues, and learn how to draw conclusions based from texts.

Andrew R. Cline, in his article "Toward a field theory of journalism", dissects the ethical framework mentioned by McKee and Porter into a broader rhetorical theory: the theory of noetic field. Noetic field theory examines journalism in light of a philosophical pursuit and presentation of information.

I will explain the results of my research through the theoretical lens of the noetic field theory of journalism as detailed by Dr. Andrew R. Cline. This theory of journalism is examined in four parts. The four parts are:

- That which can be known, and that which cannot be known

- The knower—the person responsible for analyzing knowable information and checking its credibility

- The relationship between the knower, the facts, and the audience

- The language and rhetoric of the knower

This framework lends itself to analyzing the ethics of journalism by examining the responsibilities of the journalist as a source analyzer, advocate for the truth, and a member of the rhetorical community. I will specifically be focusing on the second and third points. This will allow a more focused discussion on the responsibilities and the proper ethical behavior of the journalist.

METHODS

I reached out to six individuals and three organizations inquiring interest in being interviewed for my research. In these emails I explained why I was conducting the research, what the research was for, and what rights would be available to them as participants. I received responses from four of the individuals, and none of the organizations.

The persons interviewed were broken up into two categories based on their closeness to journalism. Two of the participants held high positions at different journalistic organizations. The remaining participant was a student that had no experience as a journalist. The interviews

with the two professionals were conducted via emailed questionnaires that contained the same

exact questions asked of the two students in person. The following will serve as an easy

reference for these sources.

Name	Occupation	Journalistic Experience
Mr. Murdock	Student	No
Journalist W.	Reporter	Yes
Editor S.	Editor	Yes

Further research was done via textual analysis of press releases from various journalistic

organizations, including IGN, Kotaku, Gamespot, and Polygon, regarding the same ethical

instance. Other texts analyzed were from personal blog posts of Brandon Orselli and Satya

Pasupuleti, who bring journalistic organizations under fire for ethical concerns. These texts were

analyzed for common language, ethical topics, and language referring to original source,

journalist, audience, and the truth.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

This essay will not seek to establish new ethical guidelines, or try to find the best way of

discovering them, it will hopefully bring an awareness to an issue that is crippling journalism

(both professional and amateur) and needs to be fixed. This awareness, however, cannot be

achieved until the role of the journalist is understood. It would be easy enough to look at a

dictionary definition for the term, but this would be unsatisfactory in establishing the kind of

research this paper uses to determine the state of ethics. In the interviews conducted the question

was asked "what is the ultimate responsibility of the journalist today? What is the journalist's

main role?" The following are the responses that were give: (also included are statements made within the text analysis documents that seem to answer this question)

Mr. Murdock: To present the truth. To convey, as accurately, whatever information they have and provide some context as to what it might mean without inventing a meaning.

Reporter W: "The journalist must seek the truth and report it."

Kotaku: "[The] want to listen and understand and empathize."

Editor S: "Being accurate, fair, honest and independent"

The Society for Professional Journalists: "Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information… treat[ing] sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect… serve the public…[and] taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public."

Being truthful, empathetic, and presenting information are consistently referenced in all of these definitions of a journalist's roles and responsibilities. These definitions come from a large variety of sources, all with different interests and backgrounds, and that certainly shows that this definition of a journalist is not isolated, it is almost unanimous and universal.

This allows us to have a good foundation for what will quickly become a sea of opinions and differences, but if we can all agree on what a journalist is, then it becomes easier to determine how that journalist should act. When asked what his opinion of journalistic ethics was, Mr. Murdock stated that he felt "that the ethics that are applied in journalism tend to be, very theoretical, that journalism has a lovely basis of ethics that may or may not be written out somewhere." One of the most interesting things that serves as a counterpoint to the claim by Mr.

Murdock is the Society for Professional Journalism's (SPJ) code of ethics. The SPJ's code of ethics was referenced by IGN, Kotaku, and Editor S. Keeping in mind that these sources come from drastically different locations and organization it can be shown that these code of ethics are not held secret, and are commonplace in journalistic workplaces. In fact, the SPJ's code of ethics can be accessed by anyone at any time on the SPJ's website. The code of ethics is simple and well organized into four main categories: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent. These categories all contained many rules and guidelines for how journalists should conduct themselves in an ethical manner.

It would seem to make sense that the student with no journalistic experience would be unaware of such a code of ethics, but the important thing to examine is whether journalists (professional and amateur) are aware of this code. As already stated, it is clear that both IGN and Kotaku are aware of the code and in their statements both use it as a starting point for their own in-house ethics. In the interview with Reporter W, when asked about the existence of a code of ethics Reporter W states "there is no universal set [of ethical guidelines]. Unfortunately, that has always been the case. Journalism has always been a morally tricky situation, and there has never been a rule book to cover everything." This seems problematic, because now it is not as easy to make a distinction between professionals and amateurs in terms of knowledge of the code of ethics. This definitely highlights one of the problem this paper is trying to identify: that awareness of journalism ethics is not enforced, and it is dangerous to assume that they are.

So we look to the amateur journalists to see how knowledge of the code affects behavior. Pasupuleti makes a direct reference to the code when he calls for an updated code for gaming journalism, and phrases like "I will not claim," seem to suggest that he is willing to adhere to the views when criticizing big-gaming journalists. This shows his willingness to adhere to a rule set

established for professionals, even when writing for an organization not classified as a major source. Orselli on the other hand does not mention the SPJ or a code of ethics. The following are samples from his article against big-gaming journalism:

- "They're looking for threats, baseless accusations, and even condemnation, but we have to fight the good fight if we're to combat these *imbeciles*." [Emphasis mine]

- These *charlatans* want gaming to grow up." [Emphasis mine]

Words like imbecile and charlatan show a direct ignorance or rejection of the SPJ's code of ethics. One of the guidelines listed for ethical journalism states "Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage…Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment (SPJ)." Using the kind of language found commonly throughout Orselli's article shows a direct violation of this code which seems ironic seems he is claiming to be fighting for a more ethical game journalism.

It would be easy to assume that professionals know the code and adhere to it, and that amateurs do not on both accounts. This is, however, not the case. Even in this small sampling it is possible to see that knowledge of the code does not necessarily affect ethical behavior, and likewise that the code while highly accessible, is not in fact widely acknowledged. This unearths an even greater problem. If these situations can exist, then is the code of ethics present by the SPJ truly effective? Certainly the guidelines it lists are accurate, and I would personally say that adhering to them would ensure ethical behavior, but if their absence does not ensure unethical behavior then where does that leave them?

IGN, Pasupuleti, Polygon, and Editor S all acknowledge the need for, or current existence of, updated or adapted ethical guidelines that go above and beyond the SPJ's. Pasupuleti and

Polygon both suggest that updated ethical codes are needed to prevent further conflicts, while

Editor S and IGN both have a separate code of ethics unique to their organization. Either way, it

is interesting to see that all of the parties that claim awareness of the code seek to update it or

expand upon it. Even Mr. Murdock, despite claiming that journalistic ethics to be theoretical,

states "there are those who genuinely do adhere to and believe in ethical standards and others

who see them as guidelines that they have to work around… I think certain foundational

principles have remained the same." Even someone outside of the journalistic world is

acknowledging that there appears to be a problem. The code of ethics, as they stand, are not

enough and do not prevent abuse.

These claims, all similar in nature, seem to point out a necessity for an updated code of

ethics, or alternatively a separate code of ethics that are unique to an organization and its target

demographic. Both IGN and Polygon stated that there was a large amount of in-house

deliberation and debate before commenting on the ethically tricky situation that is gamergate.

Both organizations claimed to have open discussions internally to determine what the most

effective and ethical course of action would be in dealing with the situation. They concluded

similarly that there was no unanimous decision, but both decided that they needed to inform their

audience on their stance in the debate. This kind of deliberation suggests that ethical concerns be

treated in a democratic fashion, and not by a sole individual. Examples like this show how ethics

should be decided, and perhaps even show the best way to inform the largest number of people,

by holding a large discourse, and through compromise and discussion, coming to a conclusion

that everyone must adhere to and stick by.

The language found in almost all of the primary sources show support of healthy

discussion, while strongly criticizing opinions that seek to harm others. Honesty and

transparency are key in these responses. The only source that does not suggest a healthy discussion is from Orselli who, as shown before, only seeks to criticize and dismantle large journalistic organizations. Even Pasupuleti suggests that a discussion needs to happen to determine what kind of ethics are needed in order to avoid ethically questionable areas. What this illustrates beautifully is that both sides of the debate, sides that are in some manner oppositional, fundamentally believe in the same thing, and desire to reach the same goal. This also shows that there are voices on both sides of the debate that are largely critical and do not add a beneficial response to the argument. This essay does not contain an Orselli-like text from the side of a professional journalistic organization, but they certainly exist, and they have largely criticized the behavior of those on the other side, instead of seeking compromise and deliberation.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This is only the beginning. I've seen the dire need for research like this to be conducted. As someone who will be in this field in an increasingly short amount of time, I want this issue to be fixed. That being said, however, this is not an issue that should be quickly or haphazardly remedied. Instead, intensive and thorough research needs to be done to fix the problem. I believe that through this research I have been able to identify some issues that need to be examined. Since this research shows that the SPJ's code of ethics is not adequate, it is necessary to compose a more comprehensive ethical code. Further research would need to be done to determine what kind of specific ethical codes are needed for a digital age.

The second main concern raised in my research was the lack of education and enforcement. I would propose that serious research be done to find the most effective way to educate the public on the practices and ethical behavior of journalists, since everyone now has

the ability to be one. As a public we need to encourage and enforce a community of fact-checking and non-judgement for professionals and amateurs alike. Along this vein, we also need to determine a constitutionally viable means of accrediting journalists, and holding all journalists, again professional and amateur, to an established code of ethics. This would entail various punishments for violating that code.

CONCLUSION

My original hypothesis, that the reason ethical issues are so constantly raised in journalism is because the ethics are so loosely defined and considered that these incidents are bound to happen time and time again, was incorrect but on the right track. The ethics of journalism are defined, if not in need of some specificity. The main issues appear to be in awareness and enforcement. The nature of digital journalism, as suggested by Orselli, is that everyone can be a journalist, a reporter, or soap-box preacher. This allows anyone to say anything and claim it as truth, and if the public is not careful, they may find themselves mislead and misinformed. The most important aspect of a journalist, and something that has been mentioned by every single source, is truthfulness. With the Noetic field theory in mind we see that the knower's main responsibility is to the truth, responsibilities to original source, audience, and self, will fall into place if the focus is truth.

With the ability of every human to be a journalist, humanity must find a greater focus on the proper education and enforcement of ethical principles. Those found in violation should be reprimanded in some fashion, because there is no excuse to be misleading or dishonest when claiming to be a presenter of truth. Every journalistic issue boils down to the truth being misrepresented. No matter what side of gamergate a person was on, it was truth that was being

sought. Those who were hurt, or threatened, or punished, were so because either they had not presented the truth, or someone mislead an audience to ends of hurting that individual or organization. Until a practical means of ensuring that both professional and amateur journalists remain ethical, the responsibility of truth must remain in the hands of humanity. Every story must be checked. The size of a publication should never grant it credibility, small and large publications are equally susceptible to posting ethically questionable content. As journalists it is our responsibility to find a workable solution to a problem that will inevitably lead to end of journalism. We can prevent this end, and we are responsible for doing so. I will end on a quote from Editor S, who, in my opinion, beautifully detailed the true power and responsibility of the journalist:

> "Journalists inform people, from voters to legislators, who make public-policy decisions. Journalists hold accountable those in authority. They chronicle joy and despair in the world, connecting people to one another— and to their stories—in a unique way. They are an essential part of the fabric of a functioning society. The strongest journalists are those who understand and accept that responsibility, and commit to being accurate, fair, honest and independent."

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