

# Journalism and Ethics

## Ethics in Journalism in the Era of Prolific Sources

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### **Abstract**

As all other human activities before the advance of technology and thought, the contemporary journalism is also changing, maintaining, in the meantime, the specificity of its role: to inform, to give everyone the chance to meet people, facts, and ideas, and then make a personal opinion.

But the advent of new technologies has paradoxically made it harder to tell the truth because the Internet is almost a lazy journalist who knows the computer just to have the whole world within the reach of a mouse. Having a manifold effect determining the network, it is no longer the man to decide what actually is news, but the response that it has had on the Net, and then in the world therefore is. The lack of filters on the Net means that everything that is available to those who use the Web works as or, just for the sake of knowledge, is assumed as the rank of truth – only to realize, as more frequently happens, that the error is always lurking. The United States, the country that is always in front of others and its technology, for the vast use they make of it, are perhaps the best example to understand how did the journalist profession change, but also have soothing forms of security and protection to the reader. The possibility of having a window permanently open to electronic newspapers that are published in the most remote nooks of the Earth may lead to the temptation of indulging transgressions.

But if you rely on the others' eyes, you fall in the risk of telling people not to trust strangers. But when American reporters are wrong, their own newspapers are the first to denounce them. And this is a sign of how there can not be a great democracy without great press and, therefore, a large press can only be an expression of a great democracy.

One matter of great emphasis, in my opinion, is the negative use, often too casual, that makes the web, now that almost everything is allowed, even interpret a fact and not merely tell about it. A couple of years ago, most broadcasting channels around the world showed pictures of a Palestinian and his son trapped in the Gaza Strip, in a shoot-out between Islamic militants and Israeli soldiers.

Eventually, as the cameras transmitted, they both died in front of the objectives of photographers. Images, as in fact happened, "were" interpreted by most of the international press, in the sense that their political values took precedence over reality. That is, the death of the two innocent people ended up in a story bigger than themselves.

But the network should be considered a great opportunity, especially when, as has recently happened during the protests in Iran, in the absence of a space for official information the journalists had only one source, the Web. Twitter reported that three people died during the protests. Some sources of information broadcasted that news, some did not. And who broke the news made a choice that is explained in the trial of the first magnitude. That is why we broke the news; in this way the drama of those moments could have best been bespoken. What we come up is whether alternative sources of news, such as bloggers and Twitter, can we rank official. I do have my concerns, others do not, and this debate will obviously continue.

When I talk to younger colleagues trying to explain the need to have only one reference point – the truth – I realize I am saying quite a trivial thing. There is a fact, and then there is the news. There is what is happening and what then becomes news. These are two elements that need and should be coincident, but often are not. And here the assessment of fairness and good work of a journalist must be taken into account: had he been able to tell what was real in fact as it actually or commonly happens in such a profession or, had he described it and hence has he bowed to other needs.

Anyone, who has endured a past in which the lack of freedom of expression had been almost uncritically accepted, possesses thirst for knowledge, for lore. The journalist is now part of a mechanism, but should not fall into thinking that he is the most important mechanism. He is a piece of the chessboard where the interest is far greater than him and where he must stand above the ability of not falling into temptation; to feel just a part, and not more, who tells the truth. A journalist can create a character, so that he can destroy a person afterwards. But when something is about to be spilled out, he must not master other than himself and his morals. In a perfect world, the journalist should not have friends; he should only think and act upon his own head, he should forget his religion, his political beliefs. Having no masters has always been the dream for most journalists, others' only reason why they started this profession is having their master. A world without ethics is not a world. A world without honest journalists, capable of telling the truth, even at the cost of their lives, is not a world but the kingdom of darkness, pain, not illuminated by the sun of freedom.

### **Journalism and Ethics**

There is perhaps no profession in the world that has been subject to as many definitions as journalism. A lawyer must defend the interests of his client, and a judge those of justice. A doctor, respecting the Hippocratic Oath, must protect the health of the sick. An architect must build attractive and functional houses whereas an engineer must make them safe. An actor must make his audience laugh, smile and be moved. A thief must be a thief and a policeman must arrest him. A politician must operate while respecting others and led by honesty. But what exactly must a journalist do?

A variety of answers can be given and none, or almost none, is wrong. The first of these, and perhaps the most obvious, is that a journalist must recount events and explain them to those who have not witnessed them directly. This definition, however, is not easily translated into reality because often today's journalists do not, though no fault of their own, tell the truth - which, by definition, is a universal value - but rather their own truth, which is something quite different.

It is not my aim to outrage anyone, and I do not want to be seen to talk nonsense, but it is perhaps more difficult today to tell the truth because the help given to us by technology seems to have dulled our capacity for analysis, examination and verification, almost forcing laziness upon the journalist, who is well aware that it is sufficient to have a computer, a plug or a battery, and a key that works as an archive. With this, the whole world can be only one video away.

In our times, we are witnessing a process that appears to be the reverse of that which saw journalists of a generation or two ago being professionally trained, a time when it was the person who decided what should end up on a sheet of paper and, therefore, on the pages of a newspaper. Today, however, it is the Net that gives weight to what subsequently ends up in newspapers, making itself a tool of knowledge.

When a news item ends up on the Net, the very fact that it can be read makes it a truth. This is a very dangerous mechanism because if the chain of repetition and quotation is not broken, no-one will doubt that the first report might not be exact, thus making it true through a process of certification that is as indirect as it is automatic.

Gossip will become a process of multiplication of the original news, a process that it will be impossible to stop. So a "non-truth" will be infinitely multiplied, exponentially enlarging not its content, but its formal recognition. Let us think of those news items that have circulated on the Net from immemorial time and that once again become relevant, despite many months if not years after they first appeared, as if a new presence on the Internet had the miraculous power to make the news fresh, not because it features new elements, but simply because no-one thought to delete the news that spawned the spin-off.

This is the inherent danger of the lack of filters on the Net, and so everything that is circulated there is raised to the rank of truth. Soon after, as is happening increasingly often, we notice that the error - which is more or less malicious - still lies in ambush.

This happens in instruments of knowledge that invite free and voluntary contribution, such as Wikipedia, where there are not only mistakes (some of them extremely serious) but also knowing manipulation of truth.

The many tools of communication today set an obsessive rhythm that allows those who use them no longer to feel bound by restrictions. To use but one example, a satellite television channel can allow itself to use, as breaking news, a story that is

then replaced a few minutes later by another story, for reasons that, at least to me, as a journalist, defy explanation.

Such a process removes the reader or viewer's perception of hierarchy, the perception of the real importance of a story, not only with regard to another story, but in absolute terms. This is the worst service that a journalist, a newspaper, a website or a television broadcaster can provide to the reader or viewer, who will mechanically be led to consider the latest main news on television as the most important, though this might not be the case. A sort of automatic cancellation of news is determined, always in favour of the latest arrival, and this in turn leads the final beneficiary to be considered only a static element, almost like a blind container that can be told anything, for which it is all the same.

The United States is home to perhaps the most useful example in understanding how the journalist's profession has changed and how, at the same time, guarantees and protection of readers have slipped.

A few years ago, as happens increasingly to people who have not seen each other for a long time, I bumped into a colleague, Gabriele Romagnoli, in an airport (whether in Italy or abroad escapes me). He is now an established writer and a contributor to *La Repubblica*, one of the most important and influential Italian newspapers.

At the time, Romagnoli was *La Repubblica's* New York correspondent, and he told me that if he wanted, every morning, sitting comfortably at his computer in his New York home, he could sift through hundreds of stories from endless provincial American newspapers, an inexhaustible reservoir of ideas for reports and in-depth analysis. He told me that while he found this fascinating, he was also bored by it, because it meant that he was at risk of losing touch with reality. This is perhaps the greatest threat to the journalists' profession:

assimilation that becomes unscrupulousness, when people begin to think that everything that circulates on the Net without the slightest filter is true, and that it can then be used freely, perhaps even with a few corrections thrown in. After all, on the Internet, nothing has an owner or an author.

Conditions such as these - a computerised window permanently open on hundreds of thousands of pages of newspapers published in the most remote corners of the Earth and that can be viewed thousands of miles away from where the stories occur - lead to a temptation to allow oneself certain transgressions.

Today, Internet has narrowed the field for journalists who really do take part in the stories that they must then report, placing itself entirely at the feet of the final consumer of the work: reader, TV viewer and radio listener.

Surfing the net certainly allows us to get a lot of information from a lot of sources, but denies us direct contact with an event, with something that has happened.

It denies, for example, the pleasure of following a political or legal debate in a hall, of picking up on looks, intercepting smiles or grimaces, which are the very things that help us to understand what is really happening.

If we rely on others, the eyes of others, to understand how something happened, we run a risk which is essentially that of no longer being journalists and so of recounting events relying on the contribution of people we do not even know and upon whom we are forced to rely.

At the beginning of this century, Jayson Blair seemed destined to become one of the biggest stars in American journalism (one of those, for the sake of clarity, with a yearly salary with at least five zeros), to the point at which the New York Times, possibly the biggest - and most authoritative - newspaper in the world, entrusted him with the most difficult investigations and the trickiest reports. And so he wrote and wrote. He wrote a lot and wrote well. He was good, he was, as they say, always on the news, and he is black (which is very important, an almost determining factor in a society such as America which today is very careful not to appear trapped in a logic that does not contemplate respect for ethnic minorities).

By understanding immediately what needed to be done, he had also managed, in a way, to become one of the main characters in the September 11 tragedy, saying and writing that a cousin of his was among the victims in the Twin Towers.

It was only a little detail that destroyed Blair's career. He copied not sentences or phrases but entire articles, perhaps written by an obscure provincial journalist, taken from the Internet and using it not as an aid, but as a dishonest opportunity that could not be missed. Sitting at his desk, he wrote stories that he then portrayed as reports, as if he had written them after visiting the area where the event had occurred. The dead cousin in the Twin Towers, who had helped place him as part of the great "American tragedy" of the terrorist attacks in September 2001, was also proven to be false, invented, perhaps even ingeniously.

Blair was found out and the New York Times, instead of covering everything up, put him on the front page, so admitting its responsibility for failing to control the activity of one of its journalists, but at the same time showing itself once more to be a peerless daily newspaper.

And considering that examples are obviously not worth too much, the same newspaper a few months ago exposed another bad apple, the economic journalist Zachery Kouwe, who in addition was caught plagiarising.

These examples from the United States do not only mean that American newspapers, when the need presents itself, are ready to admit their mistakes, and therefore make known to everyone the name of the person responsible for the error, particularly if it is a malicious one. They are also a sign that there cannot be a great democracy without a

great press and, as a result, that a great press cannot but be the expression of a great democracy. A regime can not and must not be afraid of the press if, at its foundations, it has democracy, the freedom for each citizen to have the possibility to dissent and, as a result, to have a way, through journalists, of making known to others the reasons for his or her position. In the same way, democracy gives journalists, should they want it, a way of expressing a point of view that is different from that of the person in power, without fearing for their safety or, worse still, that of their family. In Italy in the 1970s, there was a way of underlining this concept and, to tell the truth, I don't know who owns the copyright for it. However, then as now, the worst democracy will always be better than the best dictatorship.

My considerations on the chance that we might err in giving total credibility to things that travel unfettered on the web must not be taken as a blanket dismissal of the use of the Net by journalists, but the events of the last few years call for further reflection. Mine come from daily experience as I am noticing how difficult it is, for those who are reaching this profession now or intend to do so, to understand that the idea of knowing that the internet acts as a guardian angel can lead to the validation, a levelling off, an unintended cancellation of the spirit that leads us to ask ourselves questions, to investigate, to not stop at the first truth, especially when it is the most convenient.

This concept of truth is also being lost because, if something appears on the Internet, many believe that this is because it is true. This is a very serious mistake, a mistake that we can not allow ourselves to make.

Even the most basic criminology tests underline that if the same incident is witnessed by several people, who are often physically positioned close to one another and therefore have the same optical perspective, when they are called to describe what they saw, they do not say what happened, but rather what they remember seeing. The two are not always consistent.

The same is essentially true for journalists because each one of them, dealing with the same incident, tells his own truth, which can be "the" truth, although not necessarily.

This idea can be expanded with visual contributions (film or photos) that are put on the Internet or on big international circuits and that lend themselves to being interpreted, when they should instead be only what they show, what they display.

There is an example of this, from a few years ago, when television stations around the world showed the dramatic footage of a Palestinian and his young son trapped in the Gaza Strip between Islamic militants on one side, and Israeli soldiers on the other, both sides firing relentlessly. In the end, the two died in front of the cameras, in front of the camera lenses.

These images could be, and indeed were, “interpreted” by most of the international press, in that their political significance - I don’t think it was ever established whether the man and his son were killed by Israelis or by “friendly fire” - got the better of reality. In other words, the death of two innocent people who ended up in a story larger than them, more important than their own lives, became an object for exploitation, and something which to base a political thesis on.

But the Net must be considered a great opportunity, especially when, as happened recently during the people’s protests in Iran, in the absence of space for official information (and I would like to remind you that foreign correspondents were strongly advised, if not more, to stay in their offices and not to go down into the streets, where the clashes were happening), journalists who wanted to tell these stories had only one source: the net, and more specifically opposition websites, blogs and Twitter.

Nowadays, I don’t think that we can say that information on those dramatic events was the best, but an attempt was certainly made to provide it, albeit amid enormous difficulty and, I would add, concerns bordering on fear. Having said this, the lack of filters, of a “certification”, has occasionally caused injuries, such as the news that sailed the uncontrollable seas of Twitter that three people had been killed in clashes between protesters and police. The news was never confirmed but was used by some papers, needlessly making the reports on the incidents even more dramatic.

The question that we ask ourselves - and that we should ask ourselves more and more - is if alternative news sources, such as Blogger and Twitter, can have official status. Personally, I have my doubts, some of my colleagues have none (though this is not a clash between professional generations) and the debate is destined to continue.

Let us take the example of Twitter, which was born only four years ago and is now the social network with the greatest links to information. Its full potential emerged in 2008, when Twitter messages screamed the incidents in Mumbai, which was the target of a terrorist attack across the world.

Luca Conti, one of the leading Italian experts on information phenomena, wrote that “the secret to not being crushed by the immensity of the flow is to use filter functions and, above all, to carefully choose sources, whether they are individuals, media, public institutions or private companies”.

Those who use the internet for journalism should always keep this advice close to hand.

Another reason for reflection over sources such as Twitter is that, with simple witnesses the main players, news arrives in the Internet ocean before it arrives in the media. For example, when there is disorder, gunfire and dead and injured, there can be many witnesses on the ground, any of whom can describe the scene in one message. One incident can be described by many witnesses, perhaps with different details. Essentially,

the only thing that can be written - and initially the most important aspect - is that there have been incidents, the only objective fact. The rest, journalistically speaking, is a risk that can translate itself into a serious mistake.

The real danger is that the mass of news flooding Twitter replaces the media, or those who are tasked with creating information.

And this replacement carries a high rate of risk that until a few years ago was unthinkable. In this case too, the question is an ethical one and regards the journalist's list of priorities.

In other words, when a story arrives from an unspecified source, must the general need to inform prevail, even in the knowledge that error could be made, or does one fail to inform and give into doubt?

I do not have an answer, but perhaps I have found one, as often happens to me when I read. Although I do not visit them daily, I sometimes like to read excerpts of holy texts - the Bible, the Gospel, the Koran, the Talmud, it is not a religious question - to find within them, even those in some cases written dozens of centuries ago, elements of modernity, albeit with due caution. In the Gospel according to Matthew, I read the following sentence, which applies to all, regardless of creed and persuasion: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known."

The Net, beyond addresses and names, is an instrument of communication and of exchange of information that is often anonymous, which always exposes potential danger. Even a comment can have within it a hint of error or the fraudulent seed of slander.

This directly involves whoever divulges the comment, like the websites of newspapers and radio stations, some of whom, such as the French newspaper *Le Monde*, whose editorial team has decided only to allow subscribers, people whose identity it recognises, to gain access to the comments section

The web has another problem, which is real and difficult to solve: the near impossibility of deleting a drifting news item, which is not necessarily wrong, only not updated.

Let me explain: if twenty years ago, I were charged with stealing sweets and the news was published by a medium subsequently quoted by the Internet, I would be branded for life for what I did. Even if I subsequently repented and redeemed myself and done good to all, and perhaps even found myself heading towards sainthood, the stain will remain for ever, or at least until I manage to remove it. But if I am a normal person without a degree in engineering or computing, I will never manage to remove this stain from my life.

These are not just hypotheses. Recently, the European Commissioner for Industry and Tourism, the Italian Antonio Tajani, was heavily criticised for a sentence he never spoke, the result of a passionate translation by the Times which, for this very reason, ended up on the Internet. The European Commission even made a move to try and rectify the situation, but to no avail, seeing as the quote erroneously attributed to Tajani had already been posted on the Internet and will stay there for goodness knows how long.

Trivial things are enough to modify the reality of facts and journalists sometimes lose touch with etiquette, sometimes even unintentionally. We are all witnesses to this, following newspapers and television daily, even if we do not always succeed in picking up exactly on the essence of the journalist's potential to modify apparently established facts.

I would illustrate this with an example that, sadly, often comes from real life. A shootout, in a country divided along ideological lines and leading subsequently to armed conflict, ends up with dead bodies on the ground. A certain type of journalist will write: "Two guerrillas killed, one soldier dead". Another will write something significantly different, but keeping the substance of the event intact: "one soldier killed, two guerrillas dead".

It is not difficult to understand the difference: writing that a man has died does not have the same effect as saying that he has been killed, because the latter leads to an immediate double process of elaboration: absolution for the victim, condemnation for the person responsible for the death. Notice that I am not talking about stylistic finesse, about a correct but censurable way of choosing one definition over another.

I am talking about an almost pre-conceived position, which makes the journalist, as I said earlier, not a witness but an "analyst", almost a commentator.

When I talk to young colleagues or interns, and try to explain to them the need to have the truth as the only reference point, I find myself saying fairly obvious things. But daily practice of the profession does not convince me of this. I would like to tell my young colleagues about journalism what the writer Michel Tournier said about literature: "The author must not add significance to what he writes. It is the reader who interprets the novel".

The difference between individual cases being described can be grasped more accurately through comparison between agency journalism and the rest of the information world, because the agency, by definition, must provide news that is not conditioned and as close as possible to reality, above all without taking a particular side. I have worked for the ANSA agency since 1982, and my first contract was undersigned by Sergio Lepri, one of the giants of Italian journalism.

After the usual civilities - and this was the first that I had met him, one of very few occasions upon which there were no witnesses to hear what we were saying - before letting me leave, almost in a whisper, he said "Listen, Minuti, don't ever let me understand what you really think from what you write". In other words, I have interpreted the message, write what you believe is right, but don't ever be influenced by what you think. 28 years have passed, and I can still hear his advice ringing in my years every time I prepare to write an article.

It now seems appropriate to return to the concept of truth, understood as the real unfolding of events.

I would like to express an opinion that may appear to some to be pushing the definition of a concept towards paradox.

There is the fact, and then there is the news.

There is what happens, and then there is what turns out to be news.

There are two elements, therefore, that must, and that should coincide, but often do not. This is where the evaluation of the fairness and the excellence of the work of a journalist come into play. We consider whether or not they have been able to recount an episode the way it indeed unfolded or whether, in describing it, they gave in to other needs, such as making an item more spectacular, a tool designed to increase readership.

An adjective heavy on fantasy, an adverb placed where it enriches the vividness of the account is enough, and the truth of a fact is sacrificed at the altar of the audience. The main requirement of confirming veracity has weakened with time, crushed by increasingly frenetic information, which is more and more influenced by the need to arrive first and with as big an impact as possible.

Times when confirmation from several sources were needed before a story with delicate content was considered publishable belong to a bygone age, perhaps even in Anglo- Saxon journalism, as some people will remember from films of thirty years ago.

The days of truth are not always independent because sometimes the publicising of a news item occurs before all elements needed to make it public have been obtained.

In doing so, is emphasis placed on considerations and aspects that have little to do with correct information? I leave this for you to think about. In my view, publicising times for a news story are not always ethical.

In many universities, and I am sure that Vlore is among them, work is being done not only to provide excellent education to many young people, but also to prepare them for entering their country's ruling class. For today's students who want to embark upon a journalistic path, this must also be the route, because a journalist is also part

of society, and not only a witness. The journalist is part of the process that must lead a country to be the son of its own past, but also to be ready to write its own future looking at its present. Those who have known a past in which the lack of freedom of expression was accepted almost without criticism today have greater hunger to know to understand and to have the tools to judge than countries that have lived in a democracy for centuries. I am drawing close to the conclusion, in the hope that I have put forward some ideas that may be further analysed tomorrow.

I would like to end with a few considerations on the role of the journalist with regard to his own conscience, a comparison that must occur daily, given the importance of the role of information in a world that, finally, has no barriers other than the geographical and political ones imposed by Man. It is significant for me to be speaking today to those who will make up tomorrow's ruling class in Albania, in a university named Pavaresia, which if I remember rightly means "Independence". There are many historical reasons behind the name, but I like to think that it was also chosen to mark the differences between the Albania of today and that of only a decade ago.

Pavaresia, then, though it could also have been called Liri, which on top of its very soft sound, shows the world the meaning of what your fathers have achieved. Freedom.

Today's journalists are part of a mechanism, but they must not make the mistake of seeing themselves as more important than the mechanism itself. The journalist is the pawn on a chessboard on which interests - economic and political, above all - are much greater than him or her. Neither must the journalist give in to the temptation of feeling a part of these interests, no longer telling the story. Journalists can create a character in the same way that they can destroy a character.

However, as soon as they prepare to recount something, to describe what they have seen - or only think they have seen, they must have no other master than themselves and their own moral code. In a perfect world, journalists should not have any friends, should reason only with their heads, should forget their religion, their political convictions, their perplexity towards other groups - that they perceive as different because they believe in a different God or only because they have the gift of faith, because they have made private choices that the journalist does not share.

"Perfect" journalists should be able to read what they have written to their own son and daughter without having to explain why they have done it, because they have acted with honesty and propriety. Having no bosses is the dream of most journalists. For the rest, having a boss is the only reason for which they started out in this profession. A world without ethics is not a world. A world without honest journalists, capable of telling the truth, even at the expense of their own lives, is not a world, but simply the kingdom of darkness, of pain, a world not lit up by the sun of freedom - a sun towards which we should always be looking, without fear of being dazzled.