

## New Media – Ethical Issues

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### Summary

*The aim of this paper is to examine the phenomenon of ethics in the media. Its purpose is to present problems in the field of media ethics, which could possibly increase the critical awareness of the effects of this problem. The tasks of this study are: to identify the media influence on behaviour, to find examples of common ethical dilemmas and typical problems in the field of media ethics, to examine people's opinions related to a given issue, to identify similarities and differences between employees (referring to journalists and editors) and the unemployed in the media and to examine the ethics of the four different media (television, press, radio and Internet). The methodology of the study is research, personal observations and discussions, as well as interpretations of the phenomenon by various authors who have written about it. The practical significance of this work is to stimulate thinking about the theme as well as to provide some information that might be useful in any subsequent research.*

**Key words:** media, media research, ethics

### Introduction

The aim and purpose of this paper is to examine problems in the field of media ethics, in order to possibly increase the critical awareness of the effects of this problem. The tasks of this study are: to determine what are the influences of media on behaviour, to find examples of most common ethical dilemmas and typical problems in the field of media ethics, to examine people's opinions concerning these issues, to identify similarities and differences between media em-

ployees (referring to journalists and editors) and media consumers, as well as to examine ethics of four different media (television, press, radio and Internet). Methodology of this study is research, personal observations and discussions, as well as various authors' interpretations of this phenomenon. The practical significance of this paper is to stimulate discussion about the topic and provide some information that could be useful in future research.

### **Could ethics be learned?**

There are two answers to this question. Some cynics claim that ethics cannot be a subject of a study because it raises questions which cannot be answered clearly. Besides, some skeptics claim that being familiar with ethical principles and norms does not automatically make a person moral. Another school of thought, which is represented by optimistic supporters of formal ethics education, think that ethics is a subject such as mathematics, physics or history, with its set of problems and unique methods of their solution (Day, 2008). A psychologist James Rest made an attempt to summarize scientists' attitudes: People between 20 and 30 experience dramatic changes in thinking and resolution of ethical dilemmas. These changes are associated with understanding of society by the individual and the individual's role in society. The degree of changes in a person are directly associated with formal education in high school or university. Experience has shown that teaching ethics in schools is effective, i.e. that kind of education affects consciousness of individuals' morality. Moral attitudes and moral evaluation of a person have the most influence on their behaviour. Lawrence Kohlberg was especially engaged in problems of education and ethics. One of his first conclusions was that the individual's ability to deal with moral issues does not form suddenly. Just as there are stages of physical development of a person, there are stages in the process of moral development. In his book "Ethics in Media Communications: Cases and Controversies" Louis Alvin Day says that a lecturer teaching media ethics probably cannot teach moral behaviour in the sense that teaching ethical principles makes a morally impeccable person. Teaching ethics can promote moral behaviour providing means for making moral judgments, defending them, and then criticizing the consequences of one's choice. This process is known as moral reasoning. (Day, 2008).

### **On media**

Media provide us with information about innovations and deficiencies for which we have no knowledge of our own as consumers. We meet the term "media" in everyday life and we are familiar with it. We use it without much thinking. Being ubiquitous, the phenomenon of media has been a habit for some time. Our age is therefore rightly labeled as "the era of media and information." But, beware! If you take a better look, you can see that the term of media can not be taken that simply. There is a large vagueness in use. Everything gets a popular label of media, but it is not always appropriate. Therefore, we should

consider the term of media itself. "Media are an integral part of communication. They are an important part of communication in society and among people. Media are used to make a communication successful, both in individual or mass communication. In communication, by the means of media, people convey messages, they use mime, gesture, letters, images, tone, in face to face, or printing or electronic transmission or storage techniques. Media are the means of transmitting messages. Media are mediating instances without which communication is not possible. The value of media is, therefore, in the effect that contributes to the success of communication. This effect is in mediation. It is important to clarify the phenomenon of communication. The word "media" comes from the Latin adjective *medium*, which means "the one in the middle", "medium". The application of the term is connected with "the idea of mediation, the idea of the holder of spiritual expression, which breaks loose from time and space dependencies. The concept of media in everyday life is used primarily as a collective term for technical means or instruments which serve for dissemination of information."(Nadrljanski, 2010, 51, 52). One of the basic requirements to define a certain term is a completeness of the definition, i.e. the possibility of its application in a broad subject and phenomenological field. When speaking about communication and the role of media in this primary social relationship, media cannot be given only the situational role of mediator, although this is their most important feature, and be merely something between the subjects of communication and serving in transmitting and exchanging messages. For the classification of media, two criteria are relevant within communicology framework. The first one is the way of perceiving mediated messages, by which we make a distinction between visual (all the press media), audio (radio) and audio-visual (film, television, Internet). Another criterion is a form of communication practice with the immanent medium, dividing media into: media for interpersonal communication (voice recorder, computer...), media for group communication (radio, television), media of mass communication (press, radio, film, television, theatre) and since the end of the last century, the medium of virtual communication (computer network).

The negative connotations of media are mainly associated with a creation of social culture of people who share and support the same interests and who are becoming more subject to media manipulations. The mass media are among the most influential institutions in a democratic society, at the intersection between citizens and their political, economic and social institutions. Besides, media workers are crucial for transmitting cultural values. They determine which values are important and they offer symbolic signs for standards of manner, including ethical behaviour. "Media are the primary source of information in democracy. Accurate and reliable information is the basis of a democratic process." (Radojković, Miletić, 2006, pp.95-96). "Young people are generally not familiar with the fact that the ownership structure can influence media in a large scale." (Miliša, Tolić, Vertošek, 2009, p.17).

### **On Ethics in media**

"Using today's high digital technology, a journalist shapes reality and sells it as a product to users, ie public opinion, on the market. The ethics of this profession depends on self-control or self-censorship of a person who selects the product – a journalist. In the confusion and race for time of a modern man, and trying to follow some streams of modern communication in the new media and deregulation processes, there is another issue of responsibility imposed on a consumer of "media circus". Media should educate the public about the basic human rights. What is the objective of media quality, i.e. the method by which media achieves quality? Which is more important, ethics or a method of obtaining information? There is the key of the problem because ethics depends on the method. A good or bad method sets an ethical limit, within which is the ultimate ideal – the truth. The demands on media are like Sisyphian problem, but within the mass media limits they can be regulated. These demands are: freedom, quality and responsibility" (Panjeta, 2003, p.11). The media behaviour in this country and rules of conduct of professionals in it have always been imposed by someone else: government, ruling political parties, media tycoons close to them or other tycoons... Journalists were supposed to be completely adaptable: to follow the imposed rules strictly. The cunning ones, who had the specific talent to fulfill all the wishes of the powerful with a smile on their face – like the best prostitutes, could count on their mercy. Sometimes for the rich prize ... Everything else was less important: education, knowledge or talent. Effort and work. Especially facts." (Nikšić, 2004) Today's media professionals are more educated and trained than ever. Many of them come from universities unprepared to deal with ethical problems of the real world. It would be useful for students to face the difficult ethical dilemmas in the classroom, where they can discuss them rationally, without the pressure of harsh deadlines which await them in the future. Good professional ethics is something you should take care of and which contributes to the respect among colleagues. This is another argument in favor of a formal ethics education. According to Malović, media based on fiction began to increasingly influence the media based on facts, "a fictional story is much more interesting and exciting than a journalistic report" (Malović, 2007, 12). Miliša questions "How do media manipulations reveal social deformations?" (Miliša, Tolić, Vertovšek, 2009, p.19). Events are presented as an invented reality. "Most of the media content brings the social norms into question. Without stories about crime, violence, drugs and suicides, for example, newspapers as well as entertainment would be left without dramatic vitality. It would be unreasonable and unrealistic to delete all controversial content even if the effects on the audience are unpredictable. The goal should be devising strategies that would promote responsible treatment of antisocial behaviour in the media and to avoid approaches that encourage moral degeneration." (Day, 2008, p.320). Ethical issues related to the role of media in influencing antisocial behaviour include all three functions of mass media: news programme, entertainment and advertising.

To consider the information ethics issue means to stick only to the aspects related to the function that is given to journalists. These aspects are complex enough and it is completely reasonable to observe them from the standpoint of ethics. *What does it mean to inform?* It means to form the certain message with the intention of conveying it to someone. Information, as it is commonly understood, includes both content and form, as well as their transfer. Immediately after the media put the massacre at Columbine High School on the front pages, an incredibly large number of "plagiarisms" were reported across the country.

The question is how many people are media consumers in general. We ourselves are not aware of the fact how big the number is. It is an indicator of dependency and alienation. They do not perceive it as violence in the form of a reality show like Big Brother, The Moment of Truth, Wife Swap and various Mexican and Turkish soap operas etc. There is also a lot of rude behaviour in media which young people take as a normal form of behaviour. In the spring of 1994, Jerry Springer Show reached very low ratings, thus being in danger of canceling. Springer and his producer have brought the instant decision to turn the show into "a relationship show with lots of fights." The ratings increased by 100%. (People who were faced in the show started to discuss vigorously and often ended up fighting). Hate speech is more and more present. For example, the neo-Nazi group calling itself the SS Action Group placed a recruitment message on Warner Cable Channel in 1987. The message said: Join the American Nazis and break the red, black and Jewish power.

### **The truth in Media**

We are witnesses of a large number of tabloids which publish a variety of lies about public figures, for the sake of exclusive story and good sales. The first article of the ethical code of electronic media, concerning the duties of journalists, states that reporting has to be based on the facts supported by evidence. Local media are more concerned with guessing than with the search for truth. Local scene media intrude into privacy of public figures and others, turning the entire reporting and creation of entertainment programme into voyeurism. According to Article 33, The Public Information Act of the Republic of Croatia, any private information or personal written record (letters, diaries, notes, digital recording and the like), a figure record (photograph, drawing, film, video, digital, etc.) and voice recording (tape, gramophone, digital, etc.) can not be published without the consent of the person to whom the information relates, or the person whose words, figure or voice it includes. The TV show "All for Love" by Emotion Production, broadcasted on TV Pink, often film and broadcast private conversations and emotional scenes without permission. The commercial for "Plazma biscuits" under the slogan "It won't let you grow up", influenced the thinking of several children who refused to take a biscuit with the excuse "I want to grow up, and Plasma would not let me." Also, the vast majority of TV hosts and announcers make serious mistakes in pronunciation, word choice and

stress and the population accepts such distorted expressions as standard ones. It is interesting to mention the quiz show "The Moment of Truth" which used to be broadcasted on Croatian TV Nova, in which the participant responds to intimate questions with YES and NO, while a polygraph measures frequencies. With each new level the participant wins more money, and the questions become more intimate and improper, offensive and appalling. When a participant gave a positive answer to questions like "Would you apply physical force to persuade someone to have sex?", "Have you had an intimate relationship with your friend's wife?" or "Have you ever given a child a piece of food from the floor?", the audience was not appalled, but applauded because "that brave and honest man" won a large amount of money. Also, some public figures are improperly dressed during daily entertainment programmes, and the same shows are imbued with ads and commercials with sexual content. The local press undoubtedly emphasizes female stereotypes. A woman is looking for a rich man, she cares more about her looks than education, she is always dressed up and visits "cultural" events. Any woman who does not recognize herself within aforementioned stereotype, in the media is presented as being "behind", far from prime time. Article 3 in The Code of Ethics for Electronic Media states that broadcasters must avoid stereotypes and biases when reporting about a community. They should oppose the interlocutors who express stereotypes and prejudices in interviews and discussions. Local media do not oppose the stereotypes and prejudices, they encourage them.

### **Research problem**

The main scope of this study is examining ethics in the media (television, press, radio and the Internet). The aim of the study is to examine whether there are differences in opinion on ethics in media between media employees on the one hand and "media consumers" on the other hand. The aim is also to determine if there is a difference in opinion regarding the ethics on television, in the press and on the radio, as well as to examine the views on ethics in media generally.

Research hypotheses are:

1. The assumption is that the respondents would give positive answers to questions generally related to ethics and morality.
2. Regarding the group of respondents who are media consumers, the assumption is that their attitude on the issue of ethics in media would be negative.
3. Another assumption is that the group of employees (journalists and editors) would have a generally positive attitude on the same issue.

The sample for this pilot<sup>1</sup> study consisted of 100 subjects (59 females and 41 males). The youngest respondent was 21 years old and the oldest one 62. The

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<sup>1</sup> This study is a part of more extensive research project covering 700 respondents in Split Dalmatia County.

average age of the sample was 35. A half of the respondents (50 people) were employed in the media, and the other half were media consumers (not media employees).

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire consisting of 87 items arranged into 4 groups: a group of items related to the general attitude of people towards the concept of ethics and morality; a group of items related to attitude towards ethics on television; a group of items related to attitude towards ethics in the press; and finally a group of items related to attitude towards ethics on the radio. The respondents had to circle one of three offered answers (YES, NO, MAYBE).

The main objective of this research is to examine the attitudes of adults regarding the following topics:

- Violation of privacy in order to discover the truth,
- Whether it is reasonable to publish so called “The Crime” column,
- Disgusting content on the Internet,
- Violations of moral standards and national security while providing information on the Internet,
- Economic interests related to the media,
- Explicit and disturbing images,
- Publication of promotional materials for cigarettes,
- Publication of promotional materials for alcohol,
- Unethical content on the Internet for children,
- Unethical facilities in media used in education,
- Unprofessional people as managers of various sites,
- Showing homosexual scenes,
- Showing explicit sex scenes,
- Hate speech,
- Showing pornography,
- Youth suicide,
- emotional injuries,
- Violence,
- Aesthetic values,
- Freedom of research,
- Influence on youth,
- Stereotypes,
- The racial and ethnic minorities,
- Discrimination against women,
- Discrimination against people of different sexual orientation,
- Discrimination against older people,
- Discrimination against disabled persons,
- Prejudice,

- Ethics and morality in general (general questions).

The study was conducted in the town of Split, in November 2010. Respondents were told about the anonymity of the questionnaire. The study was conducted without difficulties. For each group of questions a particular hypothesis was set.

### **Research results**

#### **The first group of questions (ethics and morality in general)**

As for the hypothesis related to the first group of questions (5 questions), the most responses obtained were positive, thus confirming the initial assumption. "Ethics is something that is taught, not something to be born with", was answered only 5% negatively and 82% positively. "Ethics in media depends on moral behaviour and attitudes of their creators (journalists and employees)", was answered only 7% negatively and 76% positively.

#### **The second group of questions (ethics on television)**

The hypothesis that most respondents would answer negatively regarding ethics on television was confirmed as the most negative responses were obtained. "I sometimes notice disgusting content on television," was answered 4% negatively and 92% positively. "Unprofessional people should not work on TV", was responded only 4% negatively and even 91% positively.

#### **The third group of questions (ethics in the press)**

The hypothesis that most respondents would answer negatively regarding ethics in the press was confirmed. "I sometimes notice disgusting content in the press," was answered only 4% negatively and 88% positively. "Unprofessional people should not work in the press", was answered 8% negatively and 84% positively.

#### **The fourth group of questions (ethics on the radio)**

The hypothesis that most respondents would answer positively regarding ethics on the radio was confirmed. "Unprofessional people should not work on the radio," was answered 90% positively and 5% negatively.

#### **The difference in attitudes about media ethics between "consumers" and employed in the media**

The hypothesis that respondents who are media consumers would have a negative attitude, and that employees would have a generally positive attitude on the issue of ethics in media has not proved correct because the responses of both groups generally coincide. The only significant differences are observed in "The press offend senior citizens," where 24 media employees responded negatively (48% of the group of employees), as well as 40 from the group of media consumers (80% of the group of consumers); "The radio is not trying hard enough to reduce stereotypes," where 3 media employees (6%) and 19 from the group of consumers (38%) responded negatively; "The radio encourages prejudice"

where 41 media employees (82%) and 24 from the group of consumers (48%) responded negatively; and "The radio has a huge impact on young audiences," where 45 media employees (90%) and only 18 from the group of consumers (36%) responded positively.

### **Conclusion**

Interpretation of the phenomena of the same items in the studies of all three media can lead to a double conclusion. Namely, by confirmation of these assertions, it can be concluded that people believe that there are many incompetent people working in media. Or we can conclude that people are generally dissatisfied with the ethics in media and their specific content (which is not ethical), thus attributing those "errors" to people who work in the media, which forms the basis of their incompetence (we do not know whether this is a fact that people are acquainted with, or an assumption caused by dissatisfaction with the work of media and the supposition that incompetent people do what we expose to criticism). In this study of all three media items like "I sometimes notice disgusting content ..." and "Unprofessional people should not work ..." can be considered the way in which their non-concreteness may include a series of other items (which are concrete), therefore making these responses important.

The hypothesis which was not confirmed and which relates to the differences between attitudes of "media consumers" and media employees, claiming that employees would have a positive attitude on the issue of ethics in all three media, and that consumers would have a negative attitude, is based on a premise that consumers have a greater critical awareness of media ethics than those who create the media. The assumption is that political parties and advertisers dictate editorial policy in all media because media financially depend on parties and advertising production.

Since the examinees' responses in this study mainly depicted their negative attitude on the issue of ethics in media, we can undoubtedly conclude that media ethics in this country is interpreted as a major problem, and both media representatives and media consumers are aware of it. We could say that the media life which we all live in, is ruled by anarchy instead of democracy, and that the codes and laws are obeyed and sanctioned rarely. On the one hand, media have "no mercy" in presenting and publishing anything that they stumble upon, persistently and successfully escaping from ethics, driven by the desire for wealth and fame. On the other hand, the "purist" media, in an effort to clean up the contents from the sin of immorality, make a tasteless creation without any "spicy" element, making it simply unpleasant. Thus, we are left to interpret, criticize, take measures that are in our power and to hope that what we think is a product of our intellectual and mental efforts, not served portion of the media pap.

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