

Journalistic Values

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This entry provides an overview of the major journalistic values, both in Western and non-Western countries. While numerous theoretical frameworks exist, this entry focuses mainly on normative theories of the media and cultural and comparative approaches. These theories show the existence of recurrent values in journalism practice and identity: truth, accuracy, independence, public interest, monitorial role, credibility and public forum. While these values are generally accepted by journalists, key differences still exist depending on the political and socio-cultural context. I therefore devote special attention to non-Western cultures and their journalistic values, such as social harmony, collectiveness, solidarity and deference to powers. The theoretical framework for this part relates to journalistic cultures (Hanitzsch et al., 2019) and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). I conclude by detailing some open questions for future research.

Normative theories of the media; professional values; ethical standards; journalistic cultures; media systems; journalism ethics

Journalistic values refer to common standards to which journalists adhere. These values help them form a professional group. In the field of political communication, they serve as the distinguishing element that sets journalism apart from other communication practices in society. This entry explores the main theoretical frameworks for understanding journalistic values in both Western and non-Western countries.

Several theories analyse the media, for example social scientific, cultural, normative, operational and everyday theory (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p.30). Two main complementary perspectives help understand journalistic values, namely normative theories and comparative and cultural approaches. Tensions between these frameworks exist. In fact, normative theories focus on how journalists should act in society (Benson, 2008, p. 1) and multiple normative theories clarify “the range of policy and ethical choices available to guide the practice of journalism” (Benson, 2008, p. 5). They also help understand values of truth, independence, public interest and accuracy that shape professional identities.

Built upon the foundations of normative theories, comparative and cultural approaches rely on empirical studies and compare journalistic values, roles and identities in different socio-political and cultural systems.

Theoretical frameworks: normative theories of the media and comparative and cultural approaches

Formalized for the first time in *Four Theories of The Press* (Siebert et al., 1956), normative theories trace their roots back to Greek philosophy (Christians et al., 2009). They have evolved around the concepts of truth, justice, and the good, especially through philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, Milton, Kant and Marx (Christians et al., 2009). More recently, criticism of normative tradition and mainstream media has contributed to the emergence of a more participatory trend (Christians et al., 2009, p.61).

Normative theories are divided in non-democratic and democratic theories. Non-democratic theories encompass developmental theory and authoritarian theory. Democratic theories include the libertarian model, social responsibility theory, representative liberal theory, the public sphere and democratic participatory theory (Benson, 2008).

The main theories that have shaped professional values in Western countries are the libertarian and social responsibility models. The libertarian or liberal-pluralist model is rooted in the liberal philosophy of Milton and Locke (Siebert et al., 1956, p.50). The press is seen as a watchdog of democracy, reporting its abuses and dysfunctions (Siebert et al., 1956, p.56). Social responsibility theory, first formulated in *Four Theories of the Press*, is based on the idea that press freedom comes not only with rights, but also with obligations. It regards press freedom as a positive freedom accompanied by a mission of public interest (Siebert et al., 1956, p.92). The State is therefore not only required to abstain from interfering with freedom of speech, but also mandated to implement it, thus allowing intervention in specific cases (Siebert et al., 1956, pp.93-95).

Moving beyond these theories, comparative and cultural approaches help transcend a Western-centric viewpoint. Drawing on empirical data, they contribute to a deeper understanding of what journalism truly entails. The main authors who have studied media systems include Hallin and Mancini (2009): while imperfect, their work remains a milestone in comparative research. More recently, the Worlds of Journalism Study theorized the concept of journalistic cultures, showing the influence of cultural factors on professional values. Finally, the Journalistic Role Performance Project analysed professional roles as components of journalistic cultures (Mellado, 2021).

In the following, I will discuss different journalistic values elaborated by the normative framework, as delineated in ethical codes and as acknowledged by journalists themselves in comparative studies.

Journalistic values in the Western world

Journalistic values in the Western world can be divided into three non-exclusive categories: (1) those that relate to journalists' personal attitudes (truth, accuracy, objectivity, transparency); (2) those that concern the relationship with the public and society (credibility, independence, public interest); (3) those that refer to the profession as a whole (public forum and monitorial role).

Truth is the main journalistic value. Truth in journalism is more practical and less absolute than philosophical truth: it is functional, grounded in accuracy and built over time by

additional facts and interpretations (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Even if it is a goal for journalists (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021), lies and deception can be tolerated, but only if they are justified on specific grounds framed by ethical codes, such as public interest (Sanders, 2003, pp.47-50).

Nowadays, the complexity of the digital environment, information overload and disinformation lead to a paradox of knowledge in the information age: the pursuit of truth becomes more challenging, yet ultimately more precise (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p.92). The immediacy of news flow and the proliferation of sources require journalists to acquire more information. This information is often more specialized, and so not always understandable for the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p.92).

Truth is frequently mistaken for mere accuracy. While accuracy means reporting the facts correctly, without distortion or imprecision (Sanders, 2003, pp.42-43), accuracy alone is insufficient to assert the truth without coherence and interpretation of facts (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021). This value is related to verification, fairness and collection of multiple points of view as methods to get closer to the facts (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Accuracy is also linked to objectivity, along with transparency (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, pp.263-264).

In its simplest form, objectivity means factuality and being precise (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p. 460). However, objectivity is not related to supposed neutrality or impartiality, but must be understood as a method of enquiry to achieve accuracy and truth, by avoiding filters and personal prejudgments (Sanders, 2003, p.42).

Objectivity is also linked to transparency. For some authors, transparency is a means to meet ethical obligations rather than an ethical imperative or an end in itself (Craft & Vos, 2021, p.180). In some news outlets, transparency is even used as a definition of objectivity (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p. 264). In this sense, being transparent means to be clear about personal biases. However, being transparent at an individual level may not be sufficient to solve the problem of objectivity if the whole media system still keeps its own biases (Craft & Vos, 2021, p.178). Thus, transparency is a way to achieve accountability to the public, being explicit about the process of news production, about sponsored editorial content and political relationships. Nevertheless, too much transparency “runs the risk of interfering with the ability to discern the truth amidst a deluge of irrelevant information” not to mention that

opaqueness can sometimes be ethical, as shown by cases of source anonymity (Craft & Vos, 2021, p.180).

When exploring journalism's connection to society, I examine values like credibility, independence, and public interest. Credibility is entangled with trust in the news. While trust in the news is regularly analysed from the audience's perspective (e.g. Reuters Institute's Digital News Report), other works analyse it from the perspective of professionals. For example, the Worlds of Journalism Study showed a correlation between the perception of editorial freedom and credibility (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p.294). The credibility of journalists can be monitored by both their peers and the public: this is one of the tasks of ombudsmen and media councils (Christians et al., 2009, pp.55-56).

In order to achieve truth, journalism requires independence. This is both an ethical value and a right, threatened by internal and external pressures. Internal pressures, linked with the economic fragility of media outlets, are caused by pressure from shareholders and management. In some countries, e.g. France, independence is protected by law. The "conscience clause" in French legislation ensures financial compensation for journalists who resign due to substantial changes in their publication's editorial policy that are likely to affect their honour, reputation or moral interests. External pressures come from political, economic and social powers, but are also linked to forms of violence experienced by journalists, which threaten their intellectual independence.

If journalists benefit from independence to search for the truth, they only do it in the public interest, which implies both negative and positive expectations. Negative expectations are not causing social problems or extreme offense, while positive include cultural, political and moral-related goals (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p.250). In Western countries, public interest implies protecting democratic values, supporting public order and the law, having a diversity of opinions and respecting human rights (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p.252). This indicates links with social responsibility, since they share a postulate of justice conceived as a "virtue which implies the right ordering of our relationships to others" (Sanders, 2003, p.152). According to a majoritarian view of public interest expressed by Held (in McQuail & Deuze 2020, p.251), public interest is what public is interested in, while a unitarian or absolutist notion of public interest is "decided by reference to some single dominant value or ideology"

leading to paternalistic systems “in which decisions about what is good are decided by guardians or experts.”

When considering journalism as a whole, public forum and monitorial role must be considered. Liberal and public sphere theories regard journalism as a public forum promoting dialogue and reflection in society. The spread of social media and echo chambers has fragmented the public sphere, leading to polarization (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, p.271) and blurred boundaries between journalists and non-journalists, as shown by forms of citizen journalism.

The monitorial role of journalists aims to make authorities accountable for their acts and denounce their flaws (Mellado, 2021). This monitorial or watchdog role is connected to political life and finds its greatest expression in investigative journalism (Mellado, 2021; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

Non-Western values in journalism

While most of the literature analyses journalistic values within Western cultures, some works are now investigating non-Western journalistic values. The empirical research behind cultural approaches (Ramaprasad et al., 2019) has contributed to going beyond normative conceptions, showing patterns of values across different countries.

For example, despite the spread of Western standards in Africa, gaps between ethical codes and practice still exist (Frère, 2022). While each country has its own characteristics, African journalism can broadly be described by cultural relativism and a form of exceptionalism (Frère, 2022).

Some concepts, such as *Afriethics* and *Ubuntu*, reflect African journalism’s focus on the community as opposed to Western individualism (Frère, 2022, p.213).

When looking at the truth, African cultures regard the omission of truth as legitimate if it helps, for example, to avoid conflict. Similarly, journalists consider the impact of news and admit that “self-censorship might [sometimes] serve a social responsibility in crisis zones” (Frère, 2022, p. 216).

Values of solidarity with peers or honor to the head of the family evoked by Lukulunga (in Frère, 2022, p.216) also show the inadequacy of Western-based ethical standards to judge African journalism. Frère (2022) therefore advocates for a reassessment of ethics, taking into account the particularities of the African political context, which implies a reconsideration of press councils and journalism education and training, since both are modelled on Western standards.

In other areas of the Global South, heterogeneity of values is also very common: in Latin America, influences from both Europe and the US have created a form of hybrid and situated ethics, where professional values vary from one country to another, depending on cultural, political and economic realities (Waisbord & Amado, 2023, p. 16). While values are heterogeneous, “the core values of Western journalism, independence, neutrality, evenhandedness, and objectivity have been contested rather than firmly institutionalized” (Waisbord & Amado, 2023, p. 16). Despite national differences, Latin American countries share some characteristics, namely proximity between press organizations and economic and political authorities, commercialism and partisanship, and political polarization (Waisbord & Amado, 2023, p.17).

When examining the Middle East and Arab countries, some authors argue that religious values have significantly shaped them, building a system of values that encompasses truth, honesty, objectivity, fairness and justice (Musa & Ahmed, 2023, pp. 438-439). A review of ethical codes in Pakistan, Malaysia, Bahrain and Turkey shows that objectivity is theorized in codes of practice but also implemented in professional practice (Musa & Ahmed, 2023, p.439). According to the authors, these values do not simply result from the influence of the Western world. Other works analysed by Musa et Ahmed (2023) also show that other values exist, such as “chain of transmission”, as well as the idea of “prophetic journalism”, which, for Ramli (in Musa & Ahmed, 2023, p.439), consists of truth, anonymity of sources and good deeds of the public.

In Asia, the notion of “Asian values”, while imperfect, helps clarify the main characteristics of journalistic values. In general, these countries share the vision of a collaborative press based on social harmony, norm conformity and deference to authority (Wu, 2024, p.180). Thus “journalism is conceived as a tool to help authorities foster national unity and economic growth” (Wu, 2024, p.184). However, literature also warns that, due to a low level of press

freedom, journalists tend to engage in self-censorship, indicating that the influence of the State can play a role in the professional values of journalism (Wu, 2024, p.184).

Perspectives for future research

This entry has shown that despite a certain uniformity of professional norms, values vary depending on political and cultural contexts. This demonstrates how normative, cultural and comparative approach can be used in a complementary way to better understand journalistic values.

However, some questions remain unaddressed: for example, the study of non-Western values could be improved. Moreover, research could address changes in professional identities and values brought about by the rise of artificial intelligence.

Finally, an interesting avenue for research could be the emergence of new values along with traditional ones. Only a few works address professional values typical of the political right-wing, illustrating that whereas traditional values of fairness and accuracy seem acquired, others (such as impartiality and objectivity) are increasingly questioned (Nadler et al., 2020). Furthermore, the emergence of social movements and the climate change crisis are challenging objectivity: scholars could try to understand whether values of diversity and engagement for the community need to be interpreted as temporary variations of objectivity or as new values.

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