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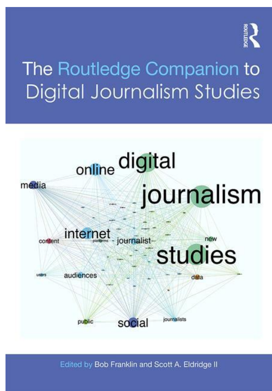

The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies

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Digital Journalism Ethics

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315713793-4
Stephen J. A. Ward
Published online on: 28 Oct 2016

How to cite :- Stephen J. A. Ward. 28 Oct 2016, *Digital Journalism Ethics from:* The Routledge Companion to Digital Journalism Studies Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Oct 2021
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315713793-4

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DIGITAL JOURNALISM ETHICS

Stephen J. A. Ward

To speak of digital journalism ethics is to speak in the future and normative tense. A widely accepted digital journalism ethics does not exist, but new ideas are emerging as journalists revise their norms and aims. Amid a media revolution, a framework is being constructed to replace a pre-digital professional ethics articulated a century ago. Therefore, we should not rest content with describing the state of journalism ethics. We should not presume that the traditional professional ethics can be simply extended to news media today. Journalism ethics should be future-orientated, full of proposals for what journalism ethics *ought* to be. The task is to define what responsible journalism means in a digital, global world. I follow this understanding of the task of ethics. Surveying trends, I identify seminal concepts that, brought together, constitute a new mindset—a pragmatic understanding of the function and justification of journalism ethics. As I will explain, this mindset sees future journalism ethics as discursive in method, 'imperfect' in epistemology, and integrative in developing new principles.

The creation of digital, global media, with many new players and platforms around the world, has undermined a pre-digital consensus on journalism ethics while raising new normative questions. Who is a journalist? What are the principles of digital journalism ethics? How should journalists use new media and engage communities? What sort of journalism is appropriate for a media-linked world where stories have global impact?

The old mindset

Good answers to these questions will require a new mindset. A mindset is a set of ideas for understanding (and dealing practically with) a practice or problem. For instance, I may understand journalism ethics from a free press standpoint, arguing that freedom of expression trumps other values such as not causing offence. Or, I may understand ethics from an absolutist mindset, arguing that principles must be universal and unchanging. A mindset is not one's specific ethical beliefs; it is a view of the nature of those beliefs.

The old mindset of Western pre-digital ethics continues to influence ethical thinking, long after the emergence of digital media. So, what was (and is) the dominant mindset of pre-digital journalism ethics and why does it need to be reformed? The answer is that the mindset is unsuited to the new media ecology and therefore fails to provide adequate guidance for

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practitioners. The mindset is unsuited for two reasons: (1) it views journalism ethics as primarily the careful observance of pre-established, static principles for a (once) stable practice, not the more dynamic process of participating in an evolving discourse about (and reinvention of) principles in an unstable journalism environment; and (2) it favors untenable, dualistic formulations of key media principles, such as objectivity, constructing a 'wall' between fact and value, reporting and interpreting, reporting and social engagement.

With regard to (1), the influential code of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) in the United States is based on a view of ethics primarily as firm content (SPJ, 2014). It organizes many norms under four principles—tell the truth and report it, be independent, minimize harm, and be accountable. The code says little about ethics as method or the skills of ethical reasoning. It encourages all journalists to apply its universal principles to situations and to (somehow) balance the principles where they conflict.

With regard to (2), the pre-digital ideal of news objectivity reduced objectivity to reporting 'just the facts' in a detached, neutral manner (Ward, 2005). The formulators of this ideal presumed that a strict separation of fact and value in reporting was possible and that all other factors—interpretation, perspective, and engagement—were biasing factors that reporters should avoid entirely. Anything beyond stating facts was subjective opinion. Therefore, pre-digital ethics did not develop norms and best practices for good interpretive and engaged story-telling—key features of today's global, digital journalism. Moreover, pre-digital ethics is unsuited to a global journalism because it was constructed for non-global media. For pre-digital ethics, journalism ethics expresses what journalists owe their fellow citizens. Journalism ethics stops at the border (Ward, 2010).

Therefore, the pre-digital mindset struggles to guide a new journalism that is increasingly perspectival, socially engaged, and global in reach. It is no surprise, then, that traditional principles cannot be extended to new forms of journalism or are rejected by new practitioners.

A new mindset: pragmatic humanism

For the rest of this chapter, I propose a mindset for our ongoing media revolution, avoiding static, dualistic principles. I call it pragmatic humanism because it regards principles, pragmatically, as fallible and evolving standards for doing journalism for humanity. The new mindset guides the invention of new principles and the reinterpretation of existing values that remain valid, such as truth-telling, editorial independence, and promoting democracy.

Pragmatic humanism is a holistic set of notions of three kinds: (1) *functional notions* about the nature and aims of journalism; (2) *epistemic notions* about the nature and justification of ethical claims; (3) *structural notions* about how to organize new ethical beliefs into new codes. The ideas are drawn from many places—philosophy, ethics, sociology, communication studies. The ideas are held by a heterogeneous band of journalists, ethicists, and citizens.

Functional notions

The new mindset makes process and participation as important as firm content and the indoctrination of principle. At a time of cross-border tensions, politically and culturally, *how* journalists discuss, invent, and modify their values should be as much a part of journalism ethics as defending the established ideas of a dominant group or culture. A primary function of journalism ethics in a global era is to encourage dialogue—informed, reasonable, global discourse on journalistic values and practices.

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Discourse ethics has been a defining aspect of much contemporary moral theorizing due to the influence of Rawls (1972) and Habermas (2001). Ethical discourse is a genuine 'give and take' among moral equals in communication across differences. It is a "communicative form of moral conduct" (Makau and Marty, 2013: 79). At the heart of discourse ethics is evolution, enrichment, and fair negotiation. It explores an *ethics-to-be*, able to deal with new conditions, new issues. For a mindset focused on defending pre-established principles, ethics as evolving discourse is of minor value. Why discourse at length if we already know what our principles are?

Dialogic discourse in journalism ethics is of paramount value. Modern societies are redolent with diverse conceptions of the good that come into conflict through media. Ethics as discourse is an alternative to conflict, dogmatism, or the tyranny of one group's morality. Recasting journalism ethics as open-ended discourse is a step toward an ethics for a plural world.

Journalism ethics as discourse implies that ethics is often emergent—the emergence of new moral values and attitudes. Social and technological changes bring forward new practices, priorities, and values. The new values become an emergent ethic that questions existing values. Journalism ethics today is a prime example of emergent ethics. It is a zone of contestation between new and old values. Before the digital revolution, professional practitioners came to think of their ethics as stable and settled. Disagreement or uncertainty were negative signs, indicating some weakness in the accepted ethics. The new mindset takes a contrary position: emergence, disagreement, and uncertainty is a natural part of ethics.

The new mindset also shifts the focus of journalism ethics from the 'micro' to the 'macro' level. The micro level consists of questions about what an individual journalist should do in specific situations, for example, grant anonymity to a source. The macro level consists of questions about the performance of a nation's news media system or the global news media system. The global nature of today's news media immerses journalism ethics in the macro issues of political morality, including issues of power, inequality, media ownership and diversity, digital divides, and how news media cover global issues. For the new mindset, journalism ethics is scarcely distinguishable from the communication policies and norms required by interconnected societies. Therefore, another primary function of journalism ethics is to be a catalyst for discourse on this macro, global level.

Epistemic notions

An epistemology is a conception of the nature of knowledge and the standards of good inquiry. An epistemology of ethics is a conception of the nature of ethical knowledge and the standards of good ethical inquiry. I recommend an epistemic perspective that I call imperfectionism (Ward, 2015). Imperfectionism develops themes in American pragmatic philosophy (see Albrecht, 2012) from John Dewey to Richard Rorty. My imperfectionism is defined by a commitment to (1) falliblism and (2) interpretism.

Falliblism is the view that there are no "metaphysical guarantees to be had that even our most firmly-held beliefs will never need revision" (Putnam, 1995: 21). Humans are imperfect inquirers. Their beliefs are fallible and never certain. The complexity of the world resists perfect results. Moreover, the cognitive capacity of humans is flawed by bias and other infelicities. Imperfectionism sees beliefs as hypotheses on how to understand phenomenon or proposals on how to regulate conduct. Falliblism is not extreme skepticism. It does not require us to doubt *everything*. It only requires us to be ready to doubt *anything*—if good reason to do so arises.

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Falliblism rejects the pervasive metaphor of absolutism, influential in pre-digital ethics, that our beliefs and standards need infallible, foundational principles, the way a house needs an unmoving foundation. Falliblism prefers the metaphor of knowledge as the current results of ongoing inquiry, where inquiry is a ship already under sail (Quine, 1960: 124). As we sail along, some beliefs strike us as questionable. We use some of our beliefs to question other beliefs. But we cannot question all of our beliefs at the same time. Falliblism dovetails with the idea of emergent ethics and the value of experiment. If we are fallible and situated, we can expect ethics to be an area of emergent and contested belief. We improve our beliefs through new experiences and discourse with others. We explore and experiment. The imperfectionist respects many forms of thinking, even if they fail to reach certainty or eliminate disagreement. Well-grounded belief and valuable reasoning exists between the absolute and the arbitrary in ethics and other domains.

Interpretism helps to explain why we are fallible and how we evaluate ethical beliefs. Interpretism starts from the premise that humans have no direct cognitive contact with reality or the world. We always understand the world through conceptual schemes and symbols. We do not first apprehend pure facts about the world and *then* interpret them. There is no dualism of observation and interpretation. Everything we cognize, describe, explain, or know is an interpretation of experience. Knowledge is well-tested interpretation. Inquiry is construction of interpretations. Evaluative notions, like objectivity, are standards for evaluating interpretations. Therefore, all forms of journalism and all journalism stories and articles are interpretations, and journalistic norms are tools for evaluating these narratives.

Interpretation is the way that fallible inquiry and belief-formation occur in ethics and in journalism ethics. At the most general level, ethics is based on normative interpretations of types of action, professions, and practices (Ward, 2015). A normative interpretation says *how,* ethically speaking, a type of conduct ought to be carried out by stating the social point of the activity—the activity seen in its best light (Dworkin, 1986). Norms and principles are justified insofar as they promote this purpose. In Western journalism ethics, the purpose is normally expressed by what I call 'publicism': journalism in its best light advances the public good, not just the interests of individuals or groups. That public good is usually conceived of as the good of a self-governing public in a democracy. Therefore, journalistic norms are justified if they advance democratic journalism. Any value claim, practice, or principle should promote or be consistent with journalism's public responsibilities. We are not free to make up any type of interpretation about an established practice. Our interpretations of journalism, to be taken seriously, need to account for paradigmatic examples of the practice, be consistent with the history of the practice, start from shared understandings, and advance arguments that are plausible to practitioners and resolve problems. Normative interpreters work between the absolute and the arbitrary. Within the Western tradition, different interpretations of the point of journalism can be found among modern journalists, from Walter Lippmann and Edward R. Murrow to Hunter S. Thompson and current citizen journalists. The current fragmentation in journalism ethics can be understood as a clash of normative interpretations of journalism.

Why is imperfectionism, with its twin concepts of falliblism and interpretism, important for a mindset tasked with the construction of a new journalism ethics? Because the imperfectionist approach is an epistemology specifically 'designed' to make sense of inquiry and ethical belief-formation in a changing, pluralistic world. Imperfectionism avoids the false dilemma of either an unbending absolutism or an arbitrary subjectivism. It encourages us to learn from others and to enter into dialogue. Rather than look for absolute foundations amid the winds of change, imperfectionism encourages us to participate in a global, open-ended discourse.

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Imperfectionism reminds us that the task of journalism ethics is not to preserve and protect but to reflectively engage the future with fresh minds and fresh ideas.

Structural notions: integration

To complete my analysis, I turn to structural issues. To the ideas of discursive method and imperfectionism, I add the idea of an integrative approach to developing multimedia codes of ethics.

The integrative approach responds to a worry not about content—what will the new norms be?—but about the scope and structure of any new ethics. In terms of scope, the question is: To what extent will any new ethics be able to gain the agreement of a substantial number of journalists? In terms of structure, the related question is: Will journalism ethics of the future consist only of separate and different codes for specific types of journalism practice, say a code for social media journalism, a code for investigative journalism, a code for newspaper journalism, and so on. Or will it be possible to construct, in addition to specific codes, a general or universal code that applies to most journalists, based on common values? Now that a pre-digital consensus has broken down, can journalism ethics, like humpty dumpty, be put together again?

Perhaps, integration will fail because too few journalists agree on too few principles.

Even the ideal of integration is contested. There is debate whether a journalism-wide ethics is possible or desirable. The debate is between what I call integrationists and fragmentists. An integrated ethics has unifying principles and aims that are widely shared by practitioners. A fragmented ethics lacks unifying notions. It is characterized by deep disagreement among practitioners about aims, principles, and best practices. In journalism, fragmentation is the proliferation of different views about the purpose of journalism and its main norms. To speak metaphorically, a fragmented journalism ethics is not a mainland where values connect to a hub of principles. Instead it is an archipelago of isolated 'islands' or value systems embraced by different types of journalists in different cultures. The current state of journalism ethics tends to resemble a normative archipelago. The islands are the fragments of a former, unified pre-digital professional ethics.

Integrationists believe journalists should share a set of aims and principles. Integrationists believe the reintegration of journalism around shared values is possible and desirable. Fragmentists believe fragmentation is not only a fact about journalism ethics but is also a positive state of affairs. Integration smacks of journalistic conformity and homogeneity.

In journalism, it may appear that only fragmentation is occurring, since the differences attract publicity. However, if we look closer, both integration and fragmentation are occurring. There is a movement toward integration in the revision of codes of ethics. Many major news organizations—from the BBC (2015) in the United Kingdom to the SPJ—have or are working on substantial updates of their editorial guidelines. These revisions are integrative insofar as they show how their principles apply to new practices. Fragmentation also carries on. The view that social media journalism has its own norms has been a mantra since online journalism emerged (Friend and Singer, 2007).

I reject fragmentism as a negative force. It divides journalists into camps, weakening their ability to join in common cause, for example, against threats to a free press. For the public, fragmentation may be understood as the view that there is no such thing as journalism ethics, only each journalist's values, and this may be a reason to support draconian press laws. Fragmentation makes a hash of the important idea of journalistic self-regulation since the

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latter requires regulation by a society-wide group of journalists who follow common principles. If each journalist, or each type of journalists, can construct their own ethics, without the restraint of a common code, journalistic self-regulation is not possible. Furthermore, the public will struggle to keep fragmented practitioners accountable because there are no agreed-upon principles for the evaluation of media conduct. Under the flag of fragmentation, dubious forms of journalism can be rationalized by appeal to personal values.

Fragmentism undermines the public basis of journalism ethics, noted above. Fragmentists, in rejecting integration, seem to assume mistakenly that the source of authority for journalism ethics is the good of each individual journalist or each island of journalists. Moreover, fragmentists lack a vocabulary for discussing how journalists, together, promote the public good because, by their own assumption, there are *no* general, 'cross-island' principles or duties.

Has the media revolution undermined the validity of publicism in journalism ethics? The answer is no. Journalism remains a social practice with impact on others. Things are less clear today because many citizen journalists do not belong to professional journalistic associations and therefore do not fall under the latter's codes of ethics. Yet, this difficulty is not a reason to reject the idea of public journalism ethics. Publicism applies to all forms of journalism practice. Its scope is not limited to professional mainstream journalists.

Publicism, as a regulating norm, needs to be redefined for digital, global journalism. Yet any redefinition must take seriously the responsibilities of journalism on the level of social and institutional practice. Publicism blocks the idea that bloggers, users of Twitter, or anyone who engages in journalism are free to make up their own idiosyncratic ethics—or not bother with ethics at all. Journalism ethics does not 'belong' to journalists. It belongs to citizens—what they need from their journalists. Journalists have no special authority to announce, *ex cathedra,* journalism's values and what it will accept as restraints on its publishing. Journalists must face the tribunal of the public, not just their own conscience, when their conduct comes into question. They need to provide reasons that other citizens would accept, from a public point of view.

I am an integrationist. Yet I believe any new integration must be guided by a sophisticated mindset that recognizes unity and diversity as permanent, valuable, and linked features of journalism ethics. An integrative approach should avoid polar opposites—treating ethics as only fragmented islands of value or treating ethics as only homogenized principles that ignore differences. An integrated approach seeks unity in difference. It grounds journalism ethics in common, general principles that serve the public good and are realized in multiple ways by various forms of journalism in different media cultures. Differences in best practices and norms are allowed, as long as they are consistent with the unifying principles. In short, local differences are ethically permissible variations of common principles. Responsible journalists do not share one unique set of ethical beliefs. What they share is an *overlap* of basic values such as truth-telling and acting as a watchdog on power. Local media cultures give these abstract principles a concrete (and varying) meaning for specific contexts.

For example, how investigative journalists, daily reporters, and social media journalists honor the unifying principles of truth-seeking, freedom of the press, accuracy, and independence can differ within acceptable limits. Journalists from Canada to South Africa will define differently what they mean by serving the public or the social responsibility of the press. Articulating this nexus of the global and local is an important feature of current theorizing in global ethics (Christians *et al.*, 2008). It should be part of the reconstruction of journalism ethics.

An integrative approach also must address the widely shared feeling that, in today's media world, codes of ethics that consist mainly of abstract principles no longer provide proper guidance for practice. Such codes say little about the 'personalization' of journalism ethics—the need to articulate norms for specific media platforms and specific types of journalism. For

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example, it is no longer sufficient to ask journalists to be accurate in a general manner, say by checking facts. How is accuracy to be realized in fast-moving online journalism, from 'live blogging' events to tracking reports on social media? Here, again, we encounter a debate within journalism ethics. And, again, the choice is often framed in terms of a dilemma: to construct either a depersonalized ethics for all journalists or a personalized ethics for types of journalism.

The depersonalized view was evident in the 2014 revision of the SPJ code of ethics. The ethics committee decided to maintain the code's de-personal approach—one that characterizes many pre-digital codes. The code is designed to be universal and intended to apply to all journalists in all situations—rich in content with many principles and norms and de-personal in being platform-neutral. The code does not name specific types of journalism. The committee rejected a personalized approach that expresses norms for types of journalism and their distinct problems.

In contrast, a recent project of the Online News Association (ONA) in the United States used the personalized approach to help members create ethical guidelines. The project, which began in 2014, stressed common process, not common content. The ONA decided that, in an era of multiple forms of journalism, the best strategy was to personalize the process—to give each online journalist or outlet the 'tools' to construct their own editorial guidelines. The ONA Website encouraged its members to 'build your own ethics.' This process has been dubbed 'DYI (Do It Yourself) ethics' (ONA, 2014). The toolkit starts with a small set of common principles that the ONA thinks most journalists would consider fundamental, such as tell the truth, do not plagiarize, and correct your errors. Then journalists are asked to make a choice between (a) traditional objective journalism, where "your personal opinion is kept under wraps," and (b) transparency journalism, "meaning it's fine to write from a certain political or social point of view as long as you're upfront about it" (ONA, 2014). The toolkit then provides guidance on constructing guidelines for about 40 areas of practice where 'honest journalists' might disagree, such as removing items from online archives, use of anonymous sources, and verification of social media sources.

The DIY approach appears to be a positive, inclusive, and democratic approach, suited to a plural media world. To others it is a regressive response since journalism ethics needs strong content. It needs to stand behind principles and not retreat to a 'process' that, like a smorgasbord, allows everyone to pick and choose what values they like.

I believe the future of journalism ethics is not a choice between de-personal and personal approaches. That is a false dilemma. Even the ONA approach is not a pure form of personalized ethics. It is an inventive hybrid of de-personal and personalized approaches, although the emphasis is solidly on the latter. Any adequate code in the future will have to combine both approaches in a creative and mind-stretching exercise. What would an integrated code of journalism ethics look like? It would consist of four levels:

Level 1: De-personalized, general principles expressing what every responsible journalist should affirm insofar as they serve the publics of self-governing democracies.

Level 2: More specific norms that fall under the principles, like the SPJ code, only there is no ban on mentioning forms of journalism or formulating rules for new practices.

Level 3: Case studies and examples of how the norms of levels 1 and 2 are applied in daily journalism, such as how to minimize harm, without a focus on new media issues.

Level 4: A set of guidelines and protocols for new media practices and platforms. This level would be a work in progress, evolving as we improve our ethical thinking in this area.

This code should be a 'living' document, existing online so that it can be constantly improved and updated in light of public discussion on issues and trends.

Unlike the personalization approach, the code would be rich in content, from the principles on levels 1 and 2 to the applications and leading-edge discussions on levels 3 and 4. Unlike the de-personalized approach, it would do more than state abstract principles for all. It would weave fundamental principles into a multi-level code.

Conclusion

I have argued that the construction of digital, global journalism ethics begins with the adoption of a new mindset for ethics in general and journalism ethics in particular. The mindset of pragmatic humanism proposes that digital, global journalism ethics be discursive in method, imperfectionist and non-dualistic in epistemology, and integrationist in developing new ethical content. The mindset rejects pre-digital ideas of journalism ethics as primarily fixed content, absolutist and dualistic in epistemology, and de-personal in developing new ethical content. However, an ethical mindset is only a first step. It is, by nature, a set of abstract ideas and general attitudes. A mindset is an approach to determining ethical content; it is not the content itself. In other writings, I have proposed principles grounded in a cosmopolitan ethics that promotes a global humanity (Ward, 2010).

Moreover, this chapter, focused on mindset, does not examine other emerging features of the new journalism ethics, such as the global ethics movement (Ward, 2013) and the important fact that citizens around the world are now engaged in journalism ethics through critical interchanges hosted by global online networks. Journalism ethics is no longer 'closed' to members of professional media organizations (Ward and Wasserman, 2015). It is open to all.

Moreover, as citizens create media content, they rub up against long-standing questions in journalism ethics. Journalism ethics becomes a 'media ethics for everyone,' part of a larger communication ethics. These trends will shape developments in journalism and media ethics.

Given the trends surveyed, the task is clear: We need to create a new, more complex, and conceptually deeper ethics for an expanding world of journalism that is professional and non-professional, mainstream and non-mainstream, online and offline, local and global.

Further reading

This chapter has developed ideas from work in global media ethics. For insight into how the 'local and global' combine in global ethics, read Christians *et al*.'s article "Toward a Global Media Ethics." Two other pieces, my book *Radical Media Ethics and Global Journalism Ethics*, and an article I wrote with Herman Wasserman titled "Open Ethics" explain in detail the shape of a digital, global journalism ethics. Friend and Singer's *Online Journalism Ethics* is a good source for the early development of a digital journalism ethics, and Makau and Marty's *Dialogue and Deliberation* explores the meaning and possibility of dialogic democracy.

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