

# The importance of ethical journalism in the 21st century

[Entertainment](#), [Journalism](#)



In the period between December 2000 and June 2012 the number of Internet users worldwide grew from 360 million to over 2.4 billion--an increase of 566% (Internet World Stats, 2012). In other words, for more than a decade, the Internet has been expanding at an average rate of six new users per second. In the United States, a country of 313 million, 81% of the population now has access to the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The incredible growth of the Internet has opened up massive new horizons for those in the business of reporting the news. Of the 253 million Americans with online connectivity, 46% now get their news from online sources at least three times a week (Pew Research Center, 2012). The rush to corner this developing market has created a climate of fierce competition among media sources. The aim of this paper, therefore, is threefold: (1) To show how increased competition in the media has contributed to the rise of "infotainment". (2) To briefly outline the key ethical standards of journalism in America. And (3) To explain the importance of an objective and ethically sound press in a democratic society.

#### Increased Competition and the Lowering of Standards for Profit

The growing extent of global connectivity has greatly increased the pace at which people consume information. With this faster pace comes a commensurate increase in demand for up-to-the-minute news reporting (Goldenberg, 2012). Media sources have found not only great opportunity in the emerging online marketplace, but also great pressure to remain solvent as traditional models of journalism become less profitable (Pârlea-Buzatu, Marin, Goran-Bazarea, Munteanu, & Lazaroiu, 2011).

According to Russian statesman Anastas Mikoyan, "When one millionaire has ten newspapers and ten million people have no newspapers--that is not freedom of the press" (Time Magazine, 1959). In respect to Mr. Mikoyan's assertion, the online revolution leveled the playing field and removed obstacles that barred the uninitiated (i. e. "ordinary" citizens) from participating in the news business (Ward, n. d.). The Internet, with its easy access to an ever increasing number of people, has widened the definition of the word journalist (Ward n. d.).

In response to the sudden influx of new voices, established media sources, desperate to maintain their audience, have turned increasingly to marketing experts for ways to make stories more compelling (Pârlea-Buzatu et al., 2011). The result of this has been a shift from objective reporting to a format that deliberately blends news and entertainment (Albæk, E., de Vreese, C. & Jebril, N., 2013).

The Internet and this so-called "infotainment" are a natural fit, as the very interactivity of the medium allows those who shape the news to gauge their audience more accurately than ever before and to personalize their broadcasts accordingly. Pârlea-Buzatu et al. (2011) went so far as to state, "Today's new media aspires to represent only the individual user's interests" (Section 2, para. 3). With this push toward personalization and entertainment, the news ceases to be a tool for the dissemination of important information to society as a whole and instead becomes an individualized commercial product delivered directly to a targeted audience (Pârlea-Buzatu et al., 2011).

## The Ethical Standards of Journalism

In the late 19th century there was a bloody competition between newspaper owners William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. The outrageous sensationalism, or Yellow Journalism, that characterized this period spiraled so far out of control that it is considered to be one of the causes of the Spanish-American War (U. S. Department of State, n. d.). It was in the aftermath of this period of moral turpitude that the fundamental strictures of journalistic integrity were codified (Ward, n. d.). According to a number of sources, there are nine fundamental rules that form the foundation of a free and ethical press (Project for Excellence in Journalism [PEJ], n. d.). For the sake of brevity, and to remain within the stated scope of this paper, three will be discussed below.

The first of these strictures is that, above all else, a journalist must tell the truth (PEJ, n. d.). All other ethical considerations are built upon the implicit covenant of trust that exists between a media source and its audience (PEJ, n. d.). When a news source cannot be trusted to release factual information it has ceased to perform its stated function.

Secondly, the loyalty of the journalist must be to the public and their welfare (PEJ, n. d.). This means providing accurate and relevant information to people of all demographics within a given population rather than to a narrow target audience. Profit is not, and should never be, the driving force in the news business. This may be antithetical to the norms of capitalism but it is an crucial feature of what is thought of as the " free press".

Finally, journalists " must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant" (PEJ, n. d. Principles, para. 7). Journalists have a responsibility to tell stories that have important implications for their readers, not to simply peddle interesting anecdotes. Whether or not they can make those important stories interesting to their audience is a measure of that individual's ability as a journalist.

History has shown that when the press is allowed to run amok, unburdened by standards and integrity, there can be disastrous real world consequences. It was with this lesson in mind that the traditional values of journalism were codified and it is because of this same lesson that such considerations remain relevant today.

#### The Function of the Press in a Democratic Society

The importance of a free and factual press in a representative democracy like our own cannot be overstated. This is a fact that the individuals who wrote the Bill of Rights were acutely aware of and why it is the First Amendment that deals with freedom of the press. In a letter dated January 16, 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

" The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them" (Looney, 2004).

If a democratic society is to function as the voice of the people, then the people must have sources (i. e. the media) where they can get factual and relevant information with which to make informed decisions as voters. When the news instead turns into a parade of celebrities, scandals and bloody disaster footage, citizens in a democracy lose the ability to effectively make these vital political decisions (Albæk et al., 2013). Journalists, therefore, serve the public interest in a role as important as that of firefighters or police officers.

In order to serve the people in this way, the press must not only release factual information but also put that information into a useful context (PEJ, n. d.). If the news is constantly focused on specific events (e. g. the current scandal) that entice individual consumers and never looks at the bigger picture then the audience is left with a series of disjointed facts of little worth (Albæk et al., 2013).

The media in a democracy also serves as a watchdog against any misconduct that might occur within the government (PEJ, n. d.). Herein lies another reason that Thomas Jefferson and those like him were so adamant about protecting the freedom of the press. If the media becomes derelict in this duty, one of the checks against government power is diminished and outside of the voting booth and the court of public opinion citizens often have little recourse if abuses do occur.

## Conclusion

At present more than one third of the world's seven billion people are connected via the web (Pew Research Center, 2012). No organizing force in

human history, with the exception of the Great Religions, has ever had a similar scope. The reach of this extraordinary phenomenon will only grow as we progress farther into the 21st century.

The Internet has the remarkable ability to provide us access to up to the minute information from every corner of the world, twenty-four hours a day. The press plays a vital role in disseminating this information as well as putting it into context for us so that we can make informed decisions on important issues. The potential impact of the media on the world has never been greater. Therefore, it follows that the need for ethical standards in journalism, have also never been greater.