

Ethics essay - fourth estate

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



Media spotlight has the ability to change people's lives dramatically, in some cases it is accidental, every day people minding their own business and as a consequence of being involved in an incident which resulted in either an inspiring or devastating outcome which resulted the private lives being thrust into the media spotlight. Whilst other people who have obtained media attention due to their public appointment have had the same experience, their lives altered dramatically due to media's invasion of their privacy in the name of public interest. The Fourth Estate, a name given to the media who traditionally have been charged as the custodian for public interest, the public's watch dog, their responsibility to the public sphere is to warn us, some times educate us and they have the ability to entertain us, they also ensure that people exercising power are kept in check and held accountable. However, there is a debate looming, is it possible that today's Media, are the one's who now need to be kept in check and made accountable. The Australian Law Reform Commission, have put the Unfair Publication Defamation and Privacy legislation back on the agenda, as they believe the public are having their privacy scrutinized not for interest of the public, but for public interest. Having the legislation back on the agenda has caused much angst of the media industry, who strongly believe any more statute regulations will threaten to undermine the viability of the Fourth Estate. Overall, this essay will argue that, any new legislation will only benefit the Law profession, if the media truly believe that the Fourth Estate, whilst not constitutional, it has played an important role in our democracy over time, is worth fighting for so, it does not become invalid due to new regulation, they must admit to themselves that because of their fascination with the private

behavior of public figures, the public are voicing their concern with this fascination and the methods used by the media industry, the current reporting methods seem to have actually started to undermine the ideals of the highly regarded custom of The Fourth Estate. However, the media industry now have a great opportunity, if they want stay free of any new regulation, they need to regain public trust and be true to their democratic role as the guardian of public interest, they will need to start accepting the responsibility for the current practices and become more accountable to the self regulation systems currently in place. Since some work practices employed by media outlets have over time damaged the industry's image, especially in the eyes of the public who no longer have trust in both Journalists and media industry, the lack of trust causes a problem as the media are supposed to act as a protector in the public interest. When did the attitude of the public change? And what role does a Journalist now play in our democratic society? What is more important is how can journalists end the conflicting obligations when it comes to ethical behavior. Fundamentally the role of a Journalist has not changed, their role is to warn us, inform us, educate and entertain us. (Conley, D & Lamble, S. 2006 *The Daily Miracle an introduction to Journalism*. P3). Journalists have an obligation to seek and defend and even extend the public sphere, (Stockwell, S. *Beyond the fourth estate, 1999 Democracy, deliberation and Journalism Theory, Australian Journalism Review* 21(1), pp. 37-49). The phrase Public Sphere is a term which describes an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify problems in society and through that discussion influence political action.(Hartley, J. *Communication, Cultural and Media*

Studies (2007), The Key Concepts. P191). In the latter part of the 20th Century, Journalists fulfilled their role as protector of the public sphere, The Fourth Estate played an important role as Catharine Lumby explains, the reason why the Fourth Estate played an important role was that issues which had lain dormant for years surfaced, partly because a host of political movements expanded during this period, the scope of issues that were once considered purely private matters such as domestic violence and sexual harassment were being voiced in the public sphere, (Lumby, C 1998, Twisted Tales, Private lives caught in the eyes of the public storm, AG, Sept-Oct). However, this was not sustained, Julianne Schultz warned in 1998 that a backlash was building, the public's opinion was changing, The Fourth Estate type of investigative stories that was so popular in the 1980's were not appealing to the public as they once were, people were drawn to the appeal of big personalities, glamour, the good guys and bad guys, the types of stories that you would normally have seen only in soap operas. The Fourth Estate Type of stories were easier to bypass, media managements grew tired of the costs involved in substantial investigative stories, the temptation was to go with the entertainment type stories, this made money, making money made it easier to forgo challenging and demanding Fourth Estate stories. (Schultz, J Reviving the Fourth Estate, 1998. P230-31). According to Catharine Lumby, lower standards of news reporting is the coming age of the media, However, these sources of news and gossip have an increasing impact on what makes it to the mainstream media. The issues that were brought out into the public sphere like sexual harassment and domestic violence are now the reason why media can not separate the private and the

public.(Lumby. C, Twisted Private Lives caught in the eye of the public storm, AG. September-October. P35). With the emergence of the new media a principle dilemma now existed in the media industry, which is more important, stories of public interest or stories that interest the public over a decade stories such as a Princess driven to her death by Maniacal paparazzi, Reality TV shows, radio hosts showered with vats of cash for editorial comment, ethics were hardly out of the media (Probyn, E. & Lumby, C. Remote Control New Media, New Ethics. P1). The public have been losing faith in the Journalist profession for some time, because of unethical behavior of some reporter's the public consider them untrustworthy. This untrusting of this profession has been gaining momentum for some time, as far back as January 2004 Roy Morgan released the results of an annual survey to establish which profession is considered to be the most ethical and honest, the findings are based on the results of surveying over 600 people. The findings found Journalists are ranked the third lowest on the list. Morgan, G Roy Morgan Research, finding no 3701, 2004. www.roymorgan.com/news/pols/2004/3701). Ethics are important, they help raise standards and are used in different professions, ethics reinforces respect for others Michael Anderson conducted a survey to find out how Journalism ethics rate in the quest of news. David Conley believes, Journalists face three sometimes conflicting obligations when considering privacy: getting the news out, showing compassion and educating society (Cronley, D & Lambie, S 2006, p386). Reading the MEAA code of ethics, clause 11 states clearly, Journalists should respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude. According to Ralph Potter,

Journalists should ensure that their first alliance is always the public when making a decision if faced with an ethical dilemma. (Potter, R. Potter Box. Pg2) Their role is to help ensure the health of the democratic processes, Journalism, properly understood is a necessary part of holding power to account (Chadwick, P. Fame, Media, Privacy , ACP public forum. P, 6)