

From principle to practice: Expanding the scope of scholarship on media ethics

This paper argues for the expansion of media scholarship by the integration of two approaches: media ethics and newsroom sociology. While media ethics scholarship deals with the complex but largely static principles of ethical journalism, scholars who focus on the sociology of the news assess the evolving practices of journalists. Scholarship on media ethics has often emphasised either normative expectations about what should be done or explanatory concerns about why action might diverge from these expectations. Given a rapidly changing and evolving media environment, we argue that deliberate consideration of daily practice in news ethics is both valuable and necessary

Keywords: digital news environment; ethics; ethics codes; journalism ethics; media ethics

Introduction

Scholarship on media ethics has flourished in recent decades (Williams 1995, Perlmutter and Schoen 2007, Pratt and McLaughlin 1990, Henningham 1996, Bunton 1998, Goldstein 1985). Despite this proliferation of studies, topics and perspectives, there has been limited effort to evaluate systematically the real-world effectiveness of this field of inquiry. Though there have existed specialised attempts to bridge the gap between ethical principle and ethical practice, mainstream media ethics scholarship has existed largely separate from studies that examine the changing day-to-day work practices of contemporary journalism. As media ethics deals predominately with the *principles*

of acceptable media behaviour, studies have often stressed either normative issues about what should be done, or explanatory concerns about why action might diverge from normative expectations.

While essential for the expansion of ethics research, a principle-based media ethics focus has hindered scholars' abilities to develop ethical rules that can balance what is normatively desirable with what is likely in light of the possibilities and constraints of actual news production processes. An approach that adds practice to principle should be better prepared to offer rich media ethics scholarship *and* maintain real world relevance. Such an approach would allow scholars to:

- a) inquire into how actors sometimes enact an ethical practice in their everyday routines while at other times they fail to do so, and
- b) explain why this variance in ethical practices occurs in relation to different local and contextual factors.

This paper examines existing media ethics scholarship and, on the basis of this assessment, presents the outline of a research agenda that builds upon the strengths of this scholarship and helps to integrate it with media sociology. We propose the development of a practice-based perspective to complement existing media ethics scholarship. This is not to suggest that all prior research on media ethics has excluded examination of journalistic practice but, instead, to tip the scale which has thus far been heavily weighted towards principle.

The practice-based approach is embodied in five key components:

- an empirical focus on how ethical behaviour is enacted in daily practice;
- the importance of situating this empirical focus within the broader situational dynamics of the workspaces where the news is made;
- the value of shifting the conceptual register to incorporate theories that make sense of practice dynamics at the intersection of agency and structure;
- an expansion of the methodological tool-kit towards approaches well-suited to grasp the intricacies of ethical practice;
- and a shift from top-down to bottom-up ways of developing normative guidelines.

A principle orientation to the study of media ethics

This section discusses the dominant approach to media ethics by focusing on four common topics: scholarly attempts to examine contemporary news ethics in light of various philosophical theories; the struggle to infuse these ethical principles into journalistic practice through the use of media ethics codes; explanatory descriptions of factors that may influence ethical behaviours; and, ethics scholarship that confronts some of the challenges of the digital news age.

Philosophical underpinnings

Attempts to understand media ethics have often started with discussions of the role that classical philosophical theories play in contemporary newsrooms (Baker 1997, Friend and Singer 2007, Kepplinger and Knirsch 2001, Plaisance 2005, Strentz 2002, Merrill 1997). This section will examine some arguments of three philosophers often cited in journalism ethics discussions – Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill – and the ways in which communication scholars have integrated them into their debates. It will then address a topic that is central to both the arguments of the three thinkers and to modern-day journalism ethics: in the practice of journalism, to what extent do the ends justify the means?

Aristotle's concept of the 'golden mean' suggests that the most virtuous course of action an individual can take in any ethical situation is one which sits at the midpoint between excess and deficiency. This mean is not necessarily the direct mathematical centre; it is the mean action that is rationally relevant to human beings in a given scenario. In his *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle (1973) gives the example of 'proper pride' as the mean between honour and dishonour, with the excess being 'empty vanity' and the deficiency being 'undue humility'. Cunningham (1999) has argued that Aristotle's golden mean should not be taken in its most literal sense with regards to media ethics. Journalists should not, according to Cunningham, look for the right course of action by first determining the two extremes and picking the option that falls in between them; instead, they should apply their efforts to searching for the most logical and virtuous choice. This choice will inevitably fall in between the more extreme courses of action.

According to Kant (1788/1997), there exist certain 'categorical imperatives' that human beings are dutifully required to follow at all

times. These moral obligations contrast with hypothetical imperatives, duties that are tied to particular situations. Categorical imperatives are those that are rationally appropriate for all people. These imperatives, then, must be grounded in rationality – 'pure' or logical reasoning – which provides people with the ability to understand these moral mandates.

In order for individuals to use their reason, and to rationally gauge actions as being categorically imperative or not, interactions must have a high level of transparency, argues Plaisance (2007). For journalists, transparency is crucial to their ability to uphold the ethical mandates of the field:

Kant attempted to lead us, with an inexorable logic, down a path that establishes the concept of human dignity as an essence that demands something of us in everything we do ... Transparency, or truthful forthrightness, is not just another vogue word, according to Kant; it defines much of what it means to live an ethical life (ibid: 204).

Mill's theory of utilitarianism has also had significant influence in media ethics scholarship. It posits that one of the most fundamental parts of human nature is a desire for happiness – and that the goal of all human action is to attain it. Mill (1861-3/1972) makes it clear, however, that this happiness should not be sought on an individual basis alone; instead, people must choose the action that will provide the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people.

Scholars have attempted to complicate discussions surrounding Mill's utilitarianism with regards to media ethics (Christians 2007, Elliott 2007). For example, Christians (2007) argues that utilitarian media ethics, 'rooted in ordinary human motivation to avoid pain and pursue pleasure', insist on 'neutrality and detachment' on the part of journalists. Christians finds this problematic, arguing that a more appropriate ethical model would focus less on an objective analysis of happiness, and more on a sense of duty linked to one's social community.

The positions espoused by Aristotle, Kant and Mills can be used to address concerns about whether various actions, or means, are justified by certain results, or ends. Aristotle's concept of the golden mean, for example, can be viewed as the means of achieving the ultimate end of human happiness. According to Kant, hypothetical imperatives are concerned with the

end result in given situations, while categorical imperatives are themselves ends. Kant's insistence on the categorical imperative of truth-telling might raise questions about whether or not it is ever appropriate to lie if the ends are justified (Bovee 1991). Finally, Mill's argument of utilitarianism is largely a debate about ends versus means – one must only choose the means that will result in the end that equals the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people – however interpreted.

Today's media scholars have debated about whether or not some 'bad means' in journalistic practices may be acceptable if the end is a story that benefits an individual, or even society as a whole (Henningham 1996, Kepingler and Knirsch 2001, Glasser and Ettema 2008, Black, Steele and Barney 1995, Jackson 1992, Lambeth 1986, Bok 1982). Bovee (1991) argues that there are times when the ends do justify the means and says that journalists need guidelines for making these difficult decisions. He provides a list of questions which journalists should ask themselves when making decisions about whether or not the ends justify the means. These questions seek to understand how 'good' the means truly are, the likelihood that the chosen means will achieve the chosen end and whether or not there are other means that could accomplish the same end, among other things.

These discussions surrounding classic ethical principles raise questions about topics such as neutrality, objectivity, duty to one's sources and the public, and ethical newsgathering. The following section explores the most concrete means by which journalists have attempted to integrate these and other ethical principles into their work – by developing and implementing written media ethics codes for their newsrooms.

The limited role of ethics codes

Mass media practitioners have attempted to codify the ethics of news production in printed form since the early 20th century (Black, Steele and Barney 1995, Wilkins and Brennen 2004, Cronin and McPherson 1995). Codes of ethics have remained a major point of interest among media scholars in contemporary society (Laitila 1995, Schwitzer 2004, McAdams 1986, Anderson 1987, Dimmick 1977). Discussions surrounding contemporary ethics codes have focused on three major areas of concern: the content of ethics codes; the amount reporters and editors consult them; and, news managers' seeming inability to formalise penalties for individuals who do not abide by the codes.

First, media scholars have examined the content of contemporary news ethics codes (Tehrani 2002, Herrscher 2002, Wilkins and Brennen 2004, Himelboim and Limor 2008, Limor and Gabel 2002). These discussions have generally uncovered themes such as commitments to truth, social responsibility and respect for human rights as being common throughout most codes, both in the US and elsewhere. Still, scholars generally agree that, in order to be effective, ethics codes must strike a balance between being broad enough to be relevant in a variety of situations, while not being too vague such that they are of no use in real life (Christians, Ferre and Fackler 1993, Belsey and Chadwick 1992).

Next, scholars have attempted to gauge the effectiveness of ethics codes by determining how often news workers consult them when faced with ethical dilemmas (Boeyink 1994, Pritchard and Morgan 1989). In their survey of journalists at two Indianapolis newspapers, Pritchard and Morgan (ibid) found little evidence that ethics codes directly influenced the ways in which news workers responded to ethical situations. Even in the case where journalists played a role in the development of the codes, the impact of the written codes was found to be minimal.

Finally, scholars have examined the challenges faced by news organisations in attempting to enforce ethics codes and newsroom standards (Meriwether 1986, Christians 1985-6, Encabo 1995). Cronin and McPherson (1995) found that the nation's earliest journalism codes contained no tangible means of enforcement, even though some organisations did attempt to address the topic. They argue that this challenge continues today. 'Since the development of ethics codes,' they write, 'press members have had no ability to enforce the written standards.' This and other factors 'have continually kept ethics codes from being a central concern to press members' (ibid: 897).

Though scholars have not completely ruled out the potential impact of journalism ethics codes – the codes may have indirect influences on ethical behaviour, making them more symbolic than practical (Pritchard and Morgan 1989, Boeyink 1994) – the preceding section demonstrates that journalists rarely consult printed codes of ethics, and that news managers face challenges in imposing penalties on journalists who do not abide by the codes. Additionally, though some organisational specific ethics

codes do provide journalists with specific codes of conduct (i.e. the *New York Times's* statement on ethics for travel journalists or rules for avoiding family conflicts), many of the industry-wide codes remain highly theoretical. This section demonstrates that, regardless of the content included in codes, they often do not drive ethical decision-making in the newsroom. Hence, the impact of ethics codes that seek to translate ethics principles into real-life practice is arguably limited. The following section examines scholarly attempts at understanding factors outside of commitments to broader ethical principles – factors that may influence journalistic decision-making in contemporary newsrooms.

Accounting for variance in journalism ethics

To understand how ethical decisions get made in contemporary newsrooms, media scholars have explored a number of factors that play a role in editorial work. These factors can be grouped into three distinct but related categories: those having to do with journalists and non-journalists as social actors; factors tied to the occupational and organisational dynamics of the newsroom; and, those that are connected to broader societal considerations.

To begin, scholars have sought to understand the ethical decisions made by individual actors within the newsroom to shed light on how moral decisions are made in journalism (Berkowitz 1993, Henningham 1997, Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon 2001, Plaisance and Skewes 2003, Berkowitz and Limor 2003, Coleman and Wilkins 2002, 2004). Pasti (2005) discusses the importance of demographics and social factors on individual newsroom actors. In her examinations of two different generations of Russian journalists, she finds stark differences between the ways in which older and younger journalists approach ethical dilemmas. Whereas older journalists were more conservative, and more likely to view journalism as a means of supporting social order, younger journalists viewed 'journalism as a marketplace, competition, race and battlefield where there are no ethical norms and corporate loyalties' (ibid: 109).

Scholars, too, have noted that it is not solely newsroom actors who affect the ways in which ethical decisions are made in journalism. Research has also focused on the influences of non-journalists on journalist behaviour (Braman 1988, Shoemaker and Reese 1991, Lind and Rarick 1999). In his paper *Who's responsible for journalism*, McManus (1997) argues there are

multiple actors outside of the newsroom who play important roles in how ethical decisions get made – making journalists 'decision takers' as opposed to 'decision makers'.

Some scholars contend that these forces, however, must operate within an ethical framework provided by the field of journalism itself. Thus, another category of factors on which media scholars have focused includes those that pertain to the occupational and organisational dynamics of the field. Researchers have sought to understand the ethical beliefs that can be considered 'inherent' to journalism. What kinds of ethical standards originate from the field (Lehman-Wilzig 2003, Meyers 1993, Plaisance 2005, Bertrand 2000, Belsey and Chadwick 1992, Christians and Traber 1997, Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007)? Some of the common themes that prevail in these discussions concern commitments to truthfulness, accuracy and quality of information; accountability for both what gets said, and who it is said about; respect for human dignity and a commitment to minimising harm; and, the role of the journalist as the 'gatekeeper' of information that is important to a democratic society.

Still, researchers have found that the ethics of the occupation can differ based on the specific news organisation – particularly with regards to the market-size of the news outlet (Bunton 1998, Carroll 1989, Viall 1992, Reader 2006). Researchers have tried to understand the differences between news organisations in small and large markets, given various levels of resources, different market expectations, and what Carroll (1989) calls the 'luxury of time' afforded by organisations in larger markets – which generally have longer programme times than smaller outlets.

The varying levels of community connection highlight the contributions of a third category of factors, namely the role of large societal forces. Scholars have also noted that no individual actor or collective exists within a bubble, arguing that the choices and ethical decision-making processes discussed above are all influenced by a number of societal factors and pressures. Researchers have examined this issue in both historical and contemporary contexts (Thornton 2000, Fedler 1997, Berkowitz, Limor and Singer 2004). Thornton (2000) and Fedler (1997), for example, both examined the ethical standards of early journalists. They found that strong external pressures on the news industry have existed for more than a century. Fedler

(1997) concluded that late 19th and early 20th century journalists often behaved in ways that may be deemed unethical today – but that were wholly accepted societal practices in their day.

Within the contemporary context, the impact of social factors has also been examined in a number of ways, with scholars engaging in discussions of key factors such as the importance of public opinion on journalism ethics, media competition and cross-cultural dynamics (Ward 2005, Christians 2005, Himelboim and Limor 2008, McMane 1993, Sylvie and Huang 2008). For example, Voakes (1997) found that factors such as legal constraints played a strong role in journalists' ethical decision making: 'The individual moral agent is not acting on the basis of his or her own values and moral logic ... Time and again other, more external, forces weighed more heavily upon the decision to embrace or reject a controversial action' (1997: 31).

The final section of this literature analysis focuses on what is arguably one of the largest societal changes that has affected the practice of journalism – the transition to the digital age.

Ethics in the digital age

Advances in technology have raised concerns about journalists' ability to uphold ethical standards given a modified media environment (Deuze and Yeshua 2001, Hayes, Singer and Ceppos 2007, Tehranian 2002, Berkman and Shumway 2003, Friend and Singer 2007, Whitehouse 2010). In particular, scholars have been concerned about questions such as: Has the role of journalists changed in a digital age? Does the internet create new ethical dilemmas not faced by traditional journalists? Who 'counts' as a journalist in a digital news environment? Should bloggers be expected to follow traditional codes of news ethics? This section will examine some of the answers given to these four questions.

Scholars have looked at the ways in which journalistic roles and ethical responsibilities have changed with the rise in prominence of a variety of technologies in the newsroom in recent years (Jurgensen and Meyer 1992, Friend and Singer 2007). Singer and Ashman (2009) argue that the digital age has led journalists to find ways to accommodate novel news practices (e.g. user-generated content) while upholding traditional ethical standards. Additionally, according to Jurgensen and Meyer (1992), technologies such as cell phones, sophisticated dark rooms and computers have been the cause of a shift in the ethical obligations of journalists to

the public. This shift is from that of a straightforward transmitter of information, to one of a processor of news. They argue that this shift has created new demands for journalists and that future journalists must receive 'rigorous ethical training' to deal with them. In particular, the internet and the technologies of the online newsroom have raised questions about journalists' ethical obligation to the public in contemporary society. Friend and Singer (2007) argue that journalists – once tasked with the responsibility of being the foremost gatekeepers of information within society – have become one of *many* such gatekeepers. Thus, they argue 'journalists should shift away from guarding the gate and toward sharing its upkeep' (2007: 46).

Media ethicists have also examined the ways in which the internet may be the cause of new ethical dilemmas not faced by traditional journalists (Bugeja 2007, Berkman and Shumway 2003). For example, the internet has raised new questions about the most ethical ways for journalists to handle corrections of inaccurate news content. In their interviews with current and aspiring journalists in the Netherlands, Deuze and Yeshua (2001) found that some news workers felt that it was acceptable to correct errors immediately online without running a correction, while others did not.

With the abundance of information available online from a variety of sources, and the ease in online publishing and sharing of content among 'ordinary citizens', the digital age has also raised questions about who 'counts' as a journalist in the digital age, as well as how ethical responsibility may or may not change among various actors (Friend and Singer 2007, Hayes, Singer and Ceppos 2007). According to Hayes, Singer and Ceppos, the diversity of voices that share news and information online raises concerns about ethical responsibility: 'Many traditional journalists watching audiences migrate to newer sources of information have complained that those sources do not adhere to established ethical practices and values such as verification of information, objectivity, and disclosure of political and personal biases' (2007: 265).

However, even if the distinction between who does and does not count as a journalist in contemporary society could be clearly made, questions remain about whether individuals not traditionally considered journalists should be asked to uphold some level of ethical standards (Kuhn 2007, Perlmutter and Schoen 2007).

Guidelines imposed by the US Federal Trade Commission in 2009 attempted to address this in part – the rules called on bloggers to expose their connections to advertisers, should they receive any payments or gifts for endorsements (Bush 2009). Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) find that few political blogs have stated or unstated codes of ethics. They say that an ongoing discussion surrounding the ethics of bloggers is important to media ethics studies 'Because blogs are increasingly supplementing and, for some people, replacing mainstream journalism, it is of obvious interest for students of media ethics to examine and appreciate their struggles for ethical self definition' (2007: 39).

From principle to practice

The assessment of literature in the previous section has shown that scholars have focused largely on what journalists should and should not do in order to maintain an ethical press rather than what they actually do. Additionally, when focusing on the factors that may affect ethical work, media scholarship has generally examined external situations instead of the actions of reasoning journalistic agents. This principle-based focus of media ethics has emphasised either normative issues about what should be done or explanatory matters about why actors might deviate from these normative expectations.

To supplement existing literature, we advocate a proposal for improving media ethics scholarship that further integrates practice with principle, suggesting the importance of practice to both media scholarship's real world effectiveness, and its own richness. We argue that ethics scholarship can and should be examined from a practice-based perspective while preserving its emphasis on normative 'best practices'. This is especially important given the rapidly changing online news environment. For example, in interviews with one of the authors of this paper, journalists at major US news outlets expressed concern about their shifting ethical obligations given their feelings that their news stories are rarely the final word on a particular topic (Boczkowski, in press).

Whereas previously developed ethical guidelines set the stage for normative theorising about ethical conduct in certain situations (i.e., why it is important to correct an error that was published or broadcast in previous content), the examination of actual day-to-day practice illuminated the new ways that ethics must be conceptualised in order to deal with changing work concerns (i.e. what is 'ethical' when

all traces of erroneous content can be removed with a single mouse click). Shifting the focus to practice can help news workers and scholars re-examine traditional ethical concepts in news work, such as transparency and accountability, concepts that are often easily digestible in theory, but more difficult to implement in an evolving news environment.

In other words, principle and practice – often treated separately – should be examined in tandem so that they may work together to inform the ways in which ethicality comes to life in contemporary newsrooms. We argue that many definitions of traditional ethical concepts must be reexamined from a practice vantage. For example, how might evolving conversations about privacy given the visibility of information in the digital news age (including people's relentless posting of personal information in comments sections, on message boards and on social networking sites) influence scholar and practitioner conceptions of what it means to protect the privacy of news sources?

We argue that the current media environment necessitates a shift in focus on the part of media ethics scholars. Though ethical inquiry steeped in practice – and based on the everyday situations and encounters of working journalists – should not and cannot replace normative guidelines, this line of questioning may provide journalists and scholars with new conceptions about what news workers should or should not be doing. This raises questions about the extent to which media ethics scholarship *should* be tasked with practice-based aims. We argue that a heightened level of engagement on the part of media ethics scholars during a particularly uncertain time in the journalism industry can help in addressing some of the pressing questions of the contemporary media environment.

In other words, this paper proposes that media ethics, generally conceptualised from a strictly academic or theoretical vantage point, can be asked to take an unconventional step *outside* of its usual aims and goals. The dominant approach to media ethics has made important contributions to the field. However, scholars' tendency to place emphasis on normative patterns of ethicality, as opposed to the daily, practical considerations of newsroom workers, makes it difficult to use current scholarship to account for the actual ethical and unethical behaviour of journalists. It is important to note that this paper does not intend to classify particular scholars as being either principle-oriented or practice-oriented, as most media scholars

approach ethical inquiry from a variety of vantage points. However, we argue that the overall trajectory of media ethics scholarship should move toward a more balanced approach that highlights the importance of daily practice.

Understanding the character and patterning of the choices that journalists can and do make when faced with an ethical dilemma is critical to make sense of how normative expectations get, or do not get, realised as they interact with other dimensions of everyday news making. That is, scholars should consider how the dynamics of the practices undertaken by journalists, bloggers and other news workers, and the various contexts that envelop their actions, help the analyst to make sense of how and why ethical behaviour might or might not occur. Second, and in relation to this first limitation, the principle-led approach also lacks the ability to develop guidelines that can balance what is normatively desirable with what is practically realistic given the conditions of everyday news making. This limitation has become particularly salient in the contemporary media environment. The speed with which information moves online, the presence of increased competition, and the widespread availability of both verified and unverified information make it imperative to adopt a grounded outlook that can offer realistic normative guidance for journalists in a rapidly evolving field.

In order to address these limitations, we propose to expand the horizons of scholarship in media ethics by developing a practice-based stance to complement the currently dominant approach. This stance is based on five general notions, described below.

First, the proposed practice-based stance would situate its empirical gaze on the actual practices enacted by journalists when making editorial decisions, from mundane ones to their momentous counterparts that have ethical implications. In other words, media ethics scholarship would benefit from going beyond the weighing of the many options journalists have when faced with an ethical dilemma. It must seek to understand the real practices available to, and enacted by, news workers as they define and work through these dilemmas. This might involve, for example, a greater emphasis on real-life ethical failures and successes than has been the case so far. It is important to note that this practice of 'understanding what went wrong' is not uncommon in journalism classrooms – many media ethics textbooks illuminate important concepts with real-life case studies.

However, the existence of such an approach in journalism scholarship has been limited and it is often relegated to opening vignettes or illustrations. We argue in favour of expanding these examples and building upon past attempts to incorporate real-world considerations in analyses of media ethics, such as works by Iggers (1998) and Patterson and Urbanski (2006) which demonstrated the value of a real-life approach in mass media literature through an examination of ethical breaches at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. By focusing on 'what went wrong' in two high-profile cases – that of ousted journalists Jayson Blair and Janet Cooke – Patterson and Urbanski sought to use (the glaring lack of) ethics in practice to better understand ethical principle.

Second, it is critical to embed ethical practices within the broader context of everyday editorial decision-making. As noted above, the dominant approach to media ethics has mostly focused on the role of normative and larger societal forces. Classical and contemporary studies of news production have shown that these forces are in part mediated by the more proximate dynamics that shape life in the newsroom (Boczkowski 2004, Gans 1980, Fishman 1980, Klinenberg 2002, Tuchman 1978). Building on the insights of these studies, a practice-based stance would seek to understand how ethical decisions are intertwined with the overall ecology of practice in the spaces where journalists and other news producers labour. How, for example, do larger societal factors, commercial pressures or organisational restraints affect the day-to-day practices of working journalists in such a way that shapes their ability to make ethical decisions?

Understanding the real-life ethical challenges faced by even the most virtuous and hard working journalist may require a type of proactive 'pragmatism' for *all* ethical endeavours, mirroring Ward's description of 'pragmatic objectivity [that] ... allows for human failings [and] wears a human face' (2005: 3). Additionally, how do the challenges raised by a major technological development – for instance, the potential acceleration of news delivery afforded by the diffusion of blogging and micro-blogging tools – variously affect the ethical decisions of workers in different kinds of organisations and workspaces? Answering these complex questions by locating ethical practices within the situated ecology of news making can help to create nuanced accounts of how and why these practices succeed in some contexts but not in others.

Third, to make sense of the data gathered by focusing on practices and their ties to both situated and larger contexts, a practice-led stance would expand the theoretical repertoire by incorporating notions devoted to examinations of the interplay of agency and structure in social action. One alternative would be to incorporate theories that examine ethics, as Glasser and Ettema argue, from a Habermasian discourse vantage – as ‘a process, not merely an outcome; an argument, not merely a choice’ (2008: 512). In this light, ethics should be examined not only as principles, but as performance – the daily enactment of ethical standards by journalists in a variety of settings (Joseph 2011). Additionally, scholars might consider something akin to Schön’s ‘reflection-in-action’ (1983), which values the continuous process of personal reflection in work practices. Other sources of theoretical renewal include concepts such as ‘habitus’, which focuses on the ways in which behaviours and beliefs become socialised within groups, and ‘structuration’ (Giddens 1984), which places weight on both the actions of individual actors, and the structures in which they operate. Dominant theories often utilised in media ethics scholarship tend to focus on the normative aspects of journalism, such as the social responsibility or libertarian theories of the press. Although very valuable, these theories lack the ability to account for how structural configurations can enable and constrain journalists’ practices, and also for how these practices enact a level of agency that contributes to the reinforcement and altering of these configurations. Thus, notions such as habitus and structuration would enable the analyst to make sense of the ‘mutual dependence of structure and agency’ (Giddens 1979: 69) that shapes ethical practices in news making.

Fourth, in order to improve the study of news ethics as they occur in daily practice, media scholars must add to their tool-kit methodologies which put them close to the settings where ethical decisions are made. This would entail a shift from the use of methodologies that place the researcher at a distance from those who make the news and the circumstances in which they labour, such as surveys and content analysis, to those that position them either on the scene or at a relatively close distance from it, such as ethnographies, in-depth interviews and focus groups. An example of such an approach can be seen in Singer’s examination of ethical pressures in four US newsrooms in which the author spent a week ‘observing newsroom operations, attending meetings and interviewing journalists’ at each site

(2006: 37). Additionally, a greater proximity between researchers and practising journalists afforded by these methodological choices might allow for the emergence of more shared ground between the two communities. This, in turn, could contribute to scholars’ development of normative guidelines that are grounded in a deep and nuanced understanding of the situations journalists face in their daily practices, as well as help working journalists in their quests to develop and implement ethical standards in their newsrooms.

Fifth, and building upon the previous point, a practice-based stance advocates the adoption of a bottom-up approach in the development of normative guidelines, thus departing from the top-down perspectives which have marked past scholarship. As demonstrated in the previous section, media scholars have typically attempted to understand the theoretical, normative notions of ethics first and use these as guides for media workers. This approach, however, runs the twin risks of missing the nuances of everyday news production and failing to conceive of reform strategies that are realistic in their assumptions. Instead, this paper argues that a more fruitful way of developing normative guidelines begins with examinations of the day-to-day practices and builds outward, establishing a set of ethical codes and frameworks that are consistent with the constraints and opportunities that news workers have.

Concluding remarks

This paper has provided a critical assessment of some of the most prominent areas of media ethics scholarship from the past two decades. We have shown that through their choices in research questions and methodologies, scholars have mostly focused on *what* media ethics should or could be. We have also argued that there is much to be gained from these principle-oriented appraisals of news ethics, which continuously question and challenge journalistic norms. As Christians (2008) argues, media theory helps scholars critically evaluate the most important ethical issues. However, we argue that it is important to complement the dominant theoretical approach with a perspective that emphasises *how* ethical behaviour actually takes place in everyday news making. We conclude this paper with some reflections on three implications a practice-based approach.

First, pursuing this approach would help scholars better appreciate the fluidity that marks journalistic work processes in contemporary newsrooms. Rapidly decreasing newsroom bud-

gets and staff shortages create environments where journalists often must rotate through a number of job roles on a daily basis. In this shuffle, it is easy to overlook the myriad of minute ethical challenges journalists face each day. As Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987) argue, blatant ethical misconducts such as lying and fabrication are not as prevalent as ethical breaches related to competency. Understanding the reasons why a journalist may choose to relax ethical standards under deadline pressures, or when faced with a new work routine, may help to address some of the most prevalent and often-faced ethical challenges in contemporary newsrooms.

Second, the incorporation of an approach that highlights practice would enable scholars to collaboratively reach a greater consensus about the goals of media ethics scholarship. Our analysis of past literature has found little consensus among scholars about the aim of journalism ethics as a field of inquiry. Scholars will inevitably offer multiple answers to this question. Thus far, the goals of media ethics discussions have included the identification of ethical dilemmas; the enumeration of questions surrounding these challenges; the weighing of potential responses to these dilemmas; and, the examination of journalists' patterns of thought surrounding these issues. By contrast, the practiced approach outlined above affords greater opportunities for consensus by grounding the research enterprise on an overarching goal: to understand how ethical and unethical practices actually happen in the newsmaking process. This anchoring in the dynamics of practice, in turn, should foster a greater common ground among scholars than has been the case so far.

Third, a research agenda that is sensitive to issues of *what* and *how* in journalism ethics could help to bridge the gap between news workers and media scholars. The distance between the two groups – on university campuses, at media and communications conferences, and in the daily newsroom – has turned into a liability when it comes to fostering productive conversations about journalism ethics that can engage both practitioners and scholars. Practitioners often feel that, from the stereotypical ivory tower vantage point, scholars misunderstand how ethical decision-making unfolds within the context of everyday news making. Conversely, scholars sometimes view practitioners as unwilling to extricate themselves from their concrete professional duties and engage with rather abstract conceptual and normative matters. Bridging the unfortu-

nate divide between practitioners and academics could contribute to the merging of theoretical reflection with practical insight in order to offer suggestions that are both conceptually sound and real-world applicable.

References

- Anderson, Douglas (1987) How managing editors view and deal with ethical issues, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 2 pp 341-345
- Aristotle (1973) *Nicomachean ethics, Aristotle's ethics*, Ackrill, J. L. (ed.) London, Faber and Faber
- Baker, Sherry (1997) Applying Kidder's ethical decision-making checklist to media ethics, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 pp 197-210
- Belsey, Andrew and Chadwick, Ruth (eds) (1992) *Ethical issues in journalism and the media*, London, Routledge
- Berkman, Robert and Shumway, Christopher (2003) *Digital dilemmas: Ethical issues for online media professionals*, Ames, Iowa, Iowa State Press
- Berkowitz, Dan (1993) Work roles and news selection in local TV: Examining the business-journalism dialectic, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, Vol. 37, No. 1 pp 67-81
- Berkowitz, Dan and Limor, Yehiel (2003) Professional confidence and situational ethics: Assessing the social-professional dialectic in journalistic ethics decisions, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 4 pp 783-801
- Berkowitz, Dan., Limor, Yehiel and Singer, Jane (2004) A cross-cultural look at serving the public interest, *Journalism*, Vol. 5, No. 2 pp 159-181
- Bertrand, Claude Jean (2000) *Media ethics and accountability systems*, New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers
- Black, Jay, Steele, Bob and Barney, Ralph (1995) *Doing ethics in journalism: A handbook with case studies*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon
- Boczkowski, Pablo (2004) *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press
- Boeyink, David (1994) How effective are codes of ethics – a look at 3 newsrooms, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4, pp 893-904
- Bok, Sissela (1982) *Secrets: On the ethics of concealment and revelation*, New York, Pantheon Books
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge, MA, Cambridge University Press
- Bovee, Warren (1991) The ends can justify the means – but rarely, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 6, No. 3 pp 135-145
- Braman, Sandra (1988) Public expectations of media versus standards in codes of ethics, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 1 pp 71-77
- Bugeja, Michael (2007) Making whole: The ethics of correction, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 pp 49-65
- Bunton, Kristie (1998) Social responsibility in covering community: A narrative case analysis, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 13, No. 4 pp 232-246
- Bush, Michael (2009) *New FTC rules won't deter celebrity social-media endorsements*, AdAge.com. Available online at http://adage.com/madisonandvine/article?article_id=140750, accessed on 30 November 30, 2009
- Carroll, Raymond (1989) Market-size and TV news values, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1 pp 49-56
- Christians, Clifford (1985-6) Enforcing media codes, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 pp 14-21
- Christians, Clifford (2005) Ethical theory in communications research, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 pp 3-14
- Christians, Clifford (2007) Utilitarianism in media ethics and its discontents, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, Nos 2-3 pp 113-131
- Christians, Clifford (2008) Media ethics in education, *Journalism and Communication Monographs*, Vol. 9, No. 4 pp 181-221

- Christians, Clifford, Ferre, John and Fackler, P. Mark (1993) *Good news: Social ethics and the press*, New York, Oxford University Press
- Christians, Clifford and Traber, Michael (1997) *Communication ethics and universal values*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage
- Christians, Clifford, Rotzoll, Kim and Fackler, P. Mark (1987) *Media ethics: Cases and moral reasoning*, New York, Longman
- Coleman, Renita and Wilkins, Lee (2002) Searching for the ethical journalist: An explanatory study of the moral development of news workers, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 pp 209-225
- Coleman, Renita and Wilkins, Lee (2004) The moral development of journalists: A comparison with other professions and a model for predicting high quality ethical reasoning, *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 3 pp 511-227
- Cronin, Mary and McPherson, James (1995) Pronouncements and denunciations: An analysis of state press association ethics codes from the 1920s, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 4 pp 890-901
- Cunningham, Stanley (1999) Getting it right: Aristotle's 'golden mean' as theory deterioration, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 pp 5-15
- Deuze, Mark and Yeshua, Daphna (2001) Online journalists face new ethical dilemmas: Lessons from the Netherlands, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 pp 273-292
- Dimmick, John (1977) Canons and codes as occupational ideologies, *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 27, No. 2 pp 181-187
- Elliott, Deni (2007) Getting Mill right, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, Nos 2-3 pp 100-112
- Encabo, Manuel Nunez (1995) The ethics of journalism and democracy, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 10, No. 4 pp 513-526
- Fedler, Fred (1997) Actions of early journalists often unethical, even illegal, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 12 No. 3 pp 160-170
- Fishman, Mark (1980) *Manufacturing the news*, Austin, University of Texas Press
- Friend, Cecilia and Singer, Jane (2007) *Online journalism ethics: Traditions and transitions*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe
- Gans, Herbert (1980) *Deciding what's news: A study of CBS evening news, NBC nightly news, Newsweek and Time*, New York, Vintage
- Gardner, Howard, Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Damon, William (2001) *Good work: When excellence and ethics meet*, Basic Books, New York
- Giddens, Anthony (1979) *Central problems in social theory: Action, structure and contradiction in social analysis*, London, MacMillan Press Ltd
- Giddens, Anthony (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press
- Glasser, Theodore and Ettema, James (2008) Ethics and eloquence in journalism: An approach to press accountability, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 4 pp 512-534
- Goldstein, Tom (1985) *The news at any cost: How journalists compromise their ethics to shape the news*, New York, Simon and Schuster
- Hayes, Andrew, Singer, Jane and Ceppos, Jerry (2007) Shifting roles, enduring values: The credible journalist in a digital age, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, No. 4 pp 262-279
- Henningham, John (1996) Australian journalists' professional and ethical values, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No. 1 pp 206-218
- Henningham, John (1997) The journalist's personality: An exploratory study, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3 pp 615-624
- Herrscher, Roberto (2002) A universal code of journalism ethics: Problems, limitations and proposals, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 pp 277-289
- Himmelboim, Itai and Limor, Yehiel (2008) Media perceptions of freedom of the press: A comparative international analysis of 242 codes of ethics, *Journalism*, Vol. 9, No. 3 pp 235-263
- Iggers, Jeremy (1998) *Good news, bad news: Journalism ethics and the public interest*, Boulder, CO., Westview Press
- Jackson, Jennifer (1992) Honesty in investigative journalism, *Ethical issues in journalism and the media*, Belsey, Andrew and Chadwick, Ruth (eds) London, Routledge pp 93-111
- Joseph, Nicole (2011) Correcting the record: The impact of the digital news age on the performance of press accountability, *Journalism Practice*, Vol 5 No. 6 pp 704-718
- Jurgensen, Karen and Meyer, Philip (1992) After journalism, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 2 pp 266-272
- Kant, Immanuel (1788/1997) *The analytic of pure practical reason, Critique of practical reason (Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy)*, Gregor, M. (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Kepplinger, Hans and Knirsch, Kerstin (2001) The relevance of Weberian ethics for contemporary journalism, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 16, No. 1 pp 5-23
- Klaidman, Stephen and Beauchamp, Tom (1987) *The virtuous journalist*, New York, Oxford University Press
- Klinenberg, Eric (2002) *Heat wave*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press
- Kovach, Bill and Rosenstiel, Tom (2007) *The elements of journalism*, New York, Three Rivers Press
- Kuhn, Martin (2007) Interactivity and prioritizing the human: a code of blogging ethics, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 pp 18-36
- Laitila, Tiina (1995) Journalistic codes of ethics in Europe, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 10, No. 4 pp 527-544
- Lambeth, Edmund (1986) *Committed journalism: An ethic for the profession*, Bloomington, Ind, Indiana University Press
- Lehman-Wilzig, Sam (2003) Political ill-health coverage: Professional-ethical questions regarding news reporting of leaders' ailments, *Journal of Health Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 1 pp 59-77
- Limor, Yehiel and Gabel, Ine (2002) Five versions of one code of ethics: The case study of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 pp 136-154
- Lind, Rebecca and Rarick, David (1999) Viewer sensitivity to ethical issues in TV coverage of the Clinton-Flowers scandal, *Political Communication*, Vol. 16, No. 2 pp 169-181
- McAdams, Katherine (1986) Non-monetary conflicts of interest for newspaper journalists, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 pp 700-705
- McMane, Aralynn (1993) Ethical standards of French and U.S. newspaper journalists, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 pp 207-218
- McManus, John (1997) Who's responsible for journalism?, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 12, No. 1 pp 5-17
- Meriwether, Heath and ASNE (1986-87) Newsroom ethics: How tough is enforcement, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 2, No. 1 pp 7-16
- Merrill, John (1997) *Journalism ethics: Philosophical foundations for news media*, New York, St. Martin's Press
- Meyers, Christopher (1993) Justifying journalistic harms: right to know vs. interest in knowing, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 8, No. 3 pp 133-146
- Mill, John Stuart (1972) *Utilitarianism, Utilitarianism: On liberty and considerations on representative government*, Acton, H. B. (ed.), London, J.M. Dent and Sons
- Pasti, Svetlana (2005) Two generations of contemporary Russian journalists, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 20, No. 1 pp 89-115
- Patterson, Maggie and Urbanski, Steve (2006) What Jayson Blair and Janet Cooke say about the press and the erosion of public trust, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 6 pp 828-850
- Perlmutter, David and Schoen, Mary (2007) 'If I break a rule, what do I do, fire myself?' Ethics codes of independent blogs, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, No. 1 pp 37-48

- Plaisance, Patrick Lee (2005) The mass media as discursive network: Building on the implications of libertarian and communitarian claims for news media ethics theory, *Communication Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 3 pp 292-313
- Plaisance, Patrick Lee (2007) Transparency: An assessment of the Kantian roots of a key element in media ethics practice, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 22, Nos 2-3 pp 187-207
- Plaisance, Patrick Lee and Skewes, Elizabeth (2003) Personal and professional dimensions of news work: Exploring the link between journalists' values and roles, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 4 pp 833-848
- Pratt, Cornelius and McLaughlin, Gerald (1990) Ethical dimensions of Nigerian journalists and their newspapers, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 pp 30-44
- Pritchard, David and Morgan, Madelyn (1989) Impact of ethics codes on judgments by journalists: a natural experiment, *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4 pp 934-941
- Reader, Bill (2006) Distinctions that matter: Ethical differences at large and small newspapers, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 83, No. 4 pp 851-864
- Schön, Donald (1983) *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*, New York, Basic Books
- Schwitzer, Gary (2004) A statement of principles for health care journalists, *American Journal of Bioethics*, Vol. 4, No. 4 pp W9-W13
- Shoemaker, Pamela and Reese, Stephen (1991) *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content*, New York, Longman Publishing Group
- Singer, Jane (2006) Partnerships and public service: Normative issues for journalists in converged newsrooms, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 pp 30-53
- Singer, Jane and Ashman, Ian (2009) 'Comment is free, but facts are sacred': User-generated content and ethical constructs at the Guardian, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 24 pp 3-21
- Strentz, Herb (2002) Universal ethical standards? *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 pp 263-276
- Sylvie, George and Sonia, J. (2008) Value systems and decision-making styles of newspaper front-line editors, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 1 pp 61-82
- Tehrani, Majid (2002) Peace journalism: Negotiating global media ethics, *Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 pp 58-83
- Thornton, Brian (2000) The moon hoax: Debates about ethics in 1835 New York newspapers, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 15, No. 2 pp 89-100
- Tuchman, Gaye (1978) *Making news: A study in the construction of reality*, New York, The Free Press
- Viall, Elizabeth (1992) Measuring journalistic values: A cosmopolitan/community continuum, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 pp 41-53
- Voakes, Paul (1997) Social influences on journalists' decision making in ethical situations, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 12, No. 1 pp 18-35
- Ward, Stephen (1999) Pragmatic news objectivity: Objectivity with a human face, Discussion paper D-37, Harvard University, The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
- Ward, Stephen (2005) Journalism ethics from the public's point of view, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 63, No. 2 pp 315-330
- Wilkins, Lee and Brennen, Bonnie (2004) Conflicted interests, contested terrain: Journalism ethics codes then and now, *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 pp 297-309
- Whitehouse, Ginny (2010) Newsgathering and privacy: Expanding ethics codes to reflect change in the digital media age, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 25, No. 4 pp 310-327
- Williams, Russell (1995) Ethical reasoning in television news: privacy and AIDS testing, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 pp 109-120
- Wulfemeyer, K. Tim (1990) Ethics in all-news radio: perceptions of news directors, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 3 pp 178-190

Note on the Contributors

Nicole Joseph is a doctoral student in the Media, Technology and Society programme in the School of Communication at Northwestern University. Her primary research interests include mass media ethics, journalistic accountability and the evolving role of journalists in a digital, global news environment. Before beginning her graduate career, Joseph worked as an Associate Editor at *POZ* magazine, a publication for people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, and *Real Health*, a black health and wellness magazine. Joseph received her BSc in journalism from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism.

Pablo Boczkowski's research programme examines the transition from print to digital media, with a focus on the organisational and occupational dynamics of contemporary journalism. He is the author of *Digitizing the news: Innovation in online newspapers* (MIT Press, 2004), *News at work: Imitation in an age of information abundance* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), and over twenty papers and fifty conference presentations. He is currently working on three book projects.