Media Ethics and Dilemmas

Journalists, Citizens and Technology

Christopher G. Lewis

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A 2013 Nicholas and Anna Ricco Ethics Award competition submission
As the 21st century races headlong into the future with increasing speed, many disciplines struggle to keep pace and journalism is no exception. In the ever-evolving media landscape, is a picture worth 1,000 words anymore? Can photographs or other visual media even be trusted? Today, millions of “likes” or “Tweets” become a better measure of a picture's value. Historically, photography and video held positions as undeniable proof of events. The incontrovertible belief in photography and video also includes the pitfalls of misinformation. Visual communications stand at the forefront of all news media, and without strict codes of ethics, the power of an image dies along with its credibility.

**The impact of visual communications**

Still photography and video are powerful mediums because humans are visual creatures. With the constant inundation of information, people are remarkably adept at sorting and storing images in memory. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found the characteristics of memorable images remains constant and predictable (Isola, Xiao, Torralba, & Oliva, 2011).

![Sample of the database used for the memory study. The images are sorted from more memorable (left) to less memorable (right).](image)

The finding impacts more than theory. The MIT team created a computer algorithm to predict the memorability of pictures and planned to create an iPhone app that rates the memorability of photographs. If the app becomes available, millions of iPhone users will have the ability to instantly publish memorable photographs.
Pictures come to mind more readily than text and remain longer. Unfortunately, memories are easily manipulated to create false impressions. In 2002, scientist Kimberly Wade and her research team requested childhood photographs from study participants. The team then fabricated photographs of test subjects participating in fake events. When interviewed, 50 percent of the subjects reported memories of the fake events based on the fabricated pictures (Wade, Garry, Read, & Lindsay, 2002).

Elizabeth Loftus performed a similar study in 2003. Loftus presented a doctored advertisement for Disneyland to test subjects who visited the park during childhood. The fake ad featured Bugs Bunny, a Warner Brothers character. After viewing the ad, about one-third of the study participants remembered meeting Bugs Bunny at Disneyland (Loftus, 2003).
Studies like the three outlined above illustrate the importance of ethical safeguards against the publication of misinformation. As the speed and accessibility of technology increases, so must strict adherence to codes of ethics increase.

**Technology-aided communications**

The world population embraces many technological advances, especially those focused around media and mobile devices. The statistics reveal massive numbers and increasing trends. Twitter CEO Dick Costolo reported 100 million active users and 230 million Tweets per day in 2011 (Taylor, 2011). Facebook boasts more than one billion total monthly active users as of December 2012. Out of that 1 billion, Facebook Mobile numbers 680 million monthly active users (Facebook, 2012). YouTube users upload 72 hours of video every minute with three hours per minute from mobile devices. More than 800 million users view more than 4 billion hours of video each month, 25 percent of which is watched on mobile devices (YouTube, 2012). Instagram receives 40 million photographs per day from 90 million active users (Instagram, 2013).

How does the public filter out unimportant items, in addition to verifying the legitimacy of what is left, when faced with the sheer volume of information available?

**Codes of ethics**

Journalists once worked on behalf of the public as watchdogs of the powerful and gatekeepers of information. Journalism was seen as a public service, part of the FCC’s *Fairness Doctrine*, with news divisions rarely turning a profit. Advertising, entertainment and other departments within media companies balanced the losses. This concept of news-as-public-service led to the development of professional ethics as principles of
conduct governing journalists. These principles are not based on morals so much as a system of best practices to ensure honest and accurate reporting.

The Society of Professional Journalists and the National Press Photographers Association developed similar codes of ethics for all professional journalists to adhere to. Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute wrote "Ask These 10 Questions to Make Good Ethical Decisions" (Steele, 2002). Steele reiterated the essence of the various codes of ethics, codes that still apply in the 21st century.

Eventually, public service gave way to a profit-making model. The gatekeepers concentrated on earnings over discourse to the detriment of quality reporting. News budgets continually shrink to maximize profit, and corporate ownership continuously shrinks into fewer hands. Pundits masquerade as journalists and it's hard for the public to tell the difference. The answer to why consumers go elsewhere for information is obvious. The media landscape is vast, but it is also a mess. The few consumers who still receive their news from traditional sources are slipping away as mistakes or outright fabrications occur with greater frequency. Every little mistake costs the entire profession credibility. Mistakes and lies are not new problems to the profession of journalism. They have developed alongside journalism itself.

In 1898, The New York Journal reported that a Spanish mine sank the USS Maine. The cause of the sinking has never been determined, but the reporting of that event sparked the Spanish-American War. Two young cousins, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, were able to convince many people that fairies existed in 1917 through the use of photographs. Among the believers was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a man who made logical deduction famous through the character of Sherlock Holmes (Wikipedia, 2013).
The Sinking of the Maine

The Cottingley Fairies

Extreme haste created by competition leads to the development of bad habits.

During the Sandy Hook Elementary mass shooting in 2012, CBS news ran a Facebook photograph of the suspected shooter's brother, Ryan Lanza, labeling him as the suspect instead of Adam Lanza. Other Sandy Hook reporting mistakes include:

- The shooter's child was a student, but the suspected shooter didn't have children.
- Police took custody of a second gunman in military fatigues.
• Sandy Hook's principal gave a statement afterwards, but was actually one of the first victims.
• The shooter's mother taught at the school.
• Adam Lanza killed his father, but his mother actually killed.
• School officials buzzed the shooter into the building.

Brian Walski worked as a staff photographer for The Los Angeles Times until it was discovered he faked a front-page photograph in 2003 (Riper, 2006).

During John Kerry's bid for the presidency in 2004, a fake photograph of him and Jane Fonda speaking at an Anti-Vietnam War protest surfaced. The association of Kerry with the actress known as "Hanoi Jane" was an attempt to harm his campaign.
Professional codes of ethics developed to combat issues of negligent reporting like the ones listed here and countless others. Over the years, the reputation of professional reporters gained respect and credibility. However, it is far easier to lose the public's trust than to gain it.

**Traditional journalists**

In the past, reporters only needed to scoop professional rivals. Now reporters must scoop everyone with a smart phone and an Internet connection. In modern times, all information goes out for public consumption so quickly, the idea of "getting the scoop" is almost a relic. Certainly someone must publish first, but the time difference is measured in seconds. The race for first place is a losing battle. A better option would be to concentrate on accuracy rather than speed. The social media revolution passed into established media status long ago, but some professionals still view it as a fad. Real danger lies in stubbornness. Like everything else in nature, journalists must adapt or go extinct.

Guardian, Der Spiegel, Le Monde and El País. Not only was it the first media collaboration of its size, Assange irrevocably changed traditional information dissemination.

As societies advance, the world changes. Success means adapting to the new changes. Journalism is no different. Social media hasn't killed journalism, only modified it. The question becomes: "How does the professional integrate into the modern world?"

The citizen journalist

Social media united the world in conversation unlike anything in history. Almost anyone anywhere can produce visual content and share it instantly with the world. Enter the era of the citizen journalist and the increasing erosion of professional standards. The problem of lapses in professional ethics is nothing new, only the medium and journalist-public relationship changed. More people communicate faster than ever.

Although closer to breaking news events and faster distribution, issues arise because citizen journalists lack training and accountability. In the beginning, all journalism was citizen journalism. News reporting that resembles modern journalism began with private printing presses hundreds of years ago. The presses became more formal with established rules and the professional was born. The citizen remained active, but with less access to established media. In 1963, a citizen journalist recorded the assassination of John F. Kennedy with the Zapruder Film. In 1991, a citizen journalist recorded the beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers. The King video is often cited as a cause of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.
Even those historical examples came from a time when the public possessed little access to publication. Unlimited access arrived, but citizen journalists have no accountability and no codes of ethics.

**The social journalist**

Professional journalists are burdened with the responsibilities of speed, accuracy and verification. Professionals must incorporate information from social media outlets quickly or face unemployment. How can this be accomplished?

When Hurricane Sandy raged along the East Coast, TIME magazine contacted five photographers in the area and instructed them to upload iPhone pictures of the storm directly to Instagram (Bercovici, 2012).

An Instagram photo made the magazine's cover that month. It's an interesting idea, but lacks all editorial oversight. Also, ownership rights of the image are confused because of Instagram's Terms and Conditions. Once a photo is uploaded, Instagram retains all publication rights to the image (Instagram).

Another option is The New York Times approach. The only current news from inside Syria originates from people in the middle of the conflict. For the NYT's online
feature, "Watching Syria's War," the editors promote transparency of source and clarify what information is verified and what information is not.

A third option derives from a recently founded company named Storyful. Due to the rampant fabrications online, Storyful verifies the authenticity of visual media as a paid service for news agencies. Storyful's methods are straightforward, accurate and take only a few minutes.

The solution

No one solution fits perfectly. TIME magazine has speed, but loses ownership. The NYT is far better, but takes longer and devotes many resources to verification. Storyful is an interesting upstart and would benefit the NYT, but with methods that don't necessarily need to be outsourced by a news agency.

Ultimately, a combination of all three are needed, with a few addendums.

- Embrace technology like TIME magazine.
- Present transparency like the New York Times.
• Verify for accuracy like Storyful.

• Embrace citizen journalists and provide them reasonable training.

• Adapt to change.

The most important step for the future survival of the journalism industry is maintaining the codes of ethics. Abiding by the best practices of the industry will always set the professionals apart and maintain the necessary credibility. After all, journalists are only as good as their reputation.
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