

Social Responsibility in the Media

Melisande Middleton
Center for International Media Ethics CIME
Oxford University PCMLP

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Introductory remarks

The question of social responsibility in the media continues to be timely, as highlighted by recent controversies on the topic such as the RCTV cancellation in 2007¹ or the BBC Gaza appeal debate at the start of 2009. Coming to terms with cases such as these relies on the task of defining social responsibility, and more broadly figuring out which aspects of the media's social responsibility can be feasibly regulated.

The goal of this article is to clarify the definition of social responsibility in the media through theoretical grounding of the concept coupled with examples of its applications in practical journalism. By achieving a more comprehensive understanding of what social responsibility means in the field of media, one becomes better equipped to formulate media laws that are effective and hold the potential to result in improving the role of media in society.

The newsroom definition of "media ethics" can translate into the broader concept of "social responsibility", which is appropriate for the purpose of reasoning in sociological or legal terms. At first sight, the topic hinges on the question of what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not, in the ways that the media collects and publishes information. However, discussing the definition of social responsibility runs the risk of falling into a normative or prescriptive framework, which is ultimately of little practical use, given that media ethics principles will be differently relevant depending on the specific context, journalists and audiences involved. Hence this article's attempt at drawing out the concept of social responsibility through providing examples of how the media's actions can tangibly impact audiences, both negatively and positively: answers to media ethics questions are replete with ambiguity and rarely clear-cut, making them fascinating to explore and ultimately resolvable only on a case by case basis, if at all.

¹ For an analysis of this case, see Middleton, M., "The RCTV Cliffhanger: Flagging social responsibility in the media" in *Visages d'Amérique latine*, Sciences Po, 2008.

I – Attempting a definition of social responsibility in the media

- Terminology

In dealing with media ethics, there is some confusion between the different terms: accountability, liability, responsibility, etc. Within journalism one could define accountability narrowly as being able to produce records, e.g. evidence to support what has been reported on. However, the meaning of this term is often extended to overlap with the concept of liability and responsibility: in other words, a journalist is also accountable in that he or she is held liable for the consequences of his or her reporting. Liability in this case can be taken to signify being ethically or legally responsible for one's actions; the concept of whether or not to consider journalists as being liable for their reporting hinges on the question of whether or not their profession entails a social responsibility.

The distinction between accountability and responsibility can be held as such: “*Whereas accountability often is referred to as the manifestation of claims to responsibility, the latter is the acknowledged obligation for action or behavior within frameworks of roles and morals*” (Plaisance, 2000). Responsibility is in this sense the obligation for proper custody, care and safekeeping of one's audience. More specifically, *social responsibility* entails the necessity for the journalist to keep society's interest as a top priority. This can also be seen as a collective responsibility or public interest responsibility.

Holding the press accountable for the level of responsibility of its actions implies having a clear idea of what this “responsibility” entails. In the words of Hodges who has attempted to assemble this kind of definition, “*we cannot reasonably demand that the press give an account of itself or improve its performance until we determine what it is the press is responsible for doing*” (Hodges, 1986).

- Hutchins Commission 1947

Defining social responsibility in the media traces back to a key landmark in the field: that is, a report produced by the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, more casually known as the Hutchins Commission. The project was requested in 1942 by the founder of Time magazine Henry Luce, at a time when it was believed that First Amendment freedoms were being increasingly threatened by the rise of totalitarian regimes throughout the world (Blevins, 1997). Led by the then-president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, this commission deliberated for four years before settling in 1947 on the following five guidelines for a socially responsible press in a report title *A Free and Responsible Press*:

- (1) *a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning;*
- (2) *a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;*

- (3) *the projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society;*
- (4) *the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society;*
- (5) *full access to the day's intelligence.*

Although valid, these principles might be criticized for lacking in precision, and in general are not considered to have had a substantial impact on the media industry's development in subsequent years.

- Siebert et al. and Social Responsibility Theory 1956

Still, the first formal theory of social responsibility of the press was developed by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm about a decade later in 1956. The authors were clearly inspired by the Hutchins initiative, according to their own words:

Further support for a public policy for media was provided by the influence of the 1947 American Commission on Freedom of the Press . . . This made a clear link for the first time between freedom of the press and 'social responsibility', meaning an obligation to provide trustworthy and relevant news and information as well as opportunities for diverse voices to be heard in the public arena. The Commission's report even encouraged the view that government intervention might be needed to secure the essential quality of news and information, should the press fail in this task. (Siebert et al., 1956)

Social responsibility was presented as the third theory in their book *Four Theories of the Press*, alongside Authoritarian, Libertarian and Soviet theories. One pivotal characteristic of their view is an emphasis on the media's responsibility to use its powerful position to ensure appropriate delivery of information to audiences; furthermore, if the media fails in carrying out this responsibility, it may be relevant to have a regulatory instance enforce it:

The power and near monopoly position of the media impose on them an obligation to be socially responsible, to see that all sides are fairly presented and that the public has enough information to decide; and that if the media do not take on themselves such responsibility it may be necessary for some other agency of the public to enforce it. (Siebert et al., 1956)

In both the Hutchins Commission report and the theory put forth by Siebert et al., the concept of public interest, albeit inexplicitly, lies at the heart of the definition of social responsibility. This highlights the crucial role of the communications sector in shaping societal processes: the formation of public opinion and civil society movements, social and political development patterns, including more tangible processes such as the unfurling of elections campaigns and their outcome.

- Habermas and discourse ethics (c. 1983)

Comprehending the field of communications as a determinant factor in framing the path of society's development brings us to the analysis of discourse ethics in the public space, namely in the light of Habermas' theories on the issue. According to Wahl-Jorgensen and Hernan Galperin, mass media "*must be taken seriously as the sole site for political agency in late modernity. . . Habermas reminds us that it is urgently necessary to protect, indeed insulate, the always –endangered species of public discourse.*" The concepts of dialectic in the public space, or that of a teleological framework of discourse, are both present in the work of Habermas and can be used to elucidate the concept of social responsibility in journalism. The concepts emphasize that discourse is by nature collaborative or collective, and that it inevitably bears an impact upon those receiving a piece of communication, therefore making the author of any discourse responsible for its impact and consequences on others.

Habermas' discourse ethics in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* provide a convenient framework for making this point: he borrows the universalisation principle from Kant's moral theory, extending the notion of categorical imperative to include all those affected by a norm as its participants (Hoenisch, 2000). In the context of discourse, this includes the idea that communication inherently involves those who are listening to its author. The journalist as a communicator is therefore intrinsically linked to its audience – hence the fundamental principle of the media's obligation to fulfill public interest, which also lies at the basis of social responsibility theory.

To complete this analysis, one can reformulate Habermas' principles of discourse ethics for the purpose of application to contemporary mass media, so that it may act toward the following goals (Keane, 1984, 160-62):

- a. *The development of symmetrical mutual relations between the "speaking actors", in which none of the groups exercise a monopoly on the communication means;*
- b. *The public sphere may not aim at uniformization: it should stimulate "processes of individuation" and aim at the recognition of diversification;*
- c. *The public sphere should above all try to create and stir up critical discussion instead of controlling it.*

These three goals point to key factors in maintaining an ethical media industry: prevention of monopoly over information diffusion; pluralism instead of the uniform gloss over media content that is typically brought on by authoritarian regimes; maintaining objectivity by providing different sides of an issue, which empowers audiences to formulate their own judgments and increases levels of truthfulness in reporting.

- Attempting a succinct definition for social responsibility in the media (1991)

In a very different methodological and geographical setting from that of Habermas, Owens-Ibie made an interesting attempt at formulating a concise definition for social responsibility in the media, from the perspective of a developing country, specifically Nigeria. He maintains that as part of its responsibility to serve public interest, *“the mass media are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in the government, which, in a way, keeps rulers in check. Also, the media should be reporting on and promoting discussion of ideas, opinions and truths toward the end of social refinement; acting as a nation’s ‘bulletin board’ for information and mirroring the society and its peoples just the way they are, thus exposing the heroes and the villains.”* (Owens-Ibie, 1994)

According to this author, the media are accountable in the following ways:

- *“To their audiences, to whom they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorializing.*
- *To government, to which they owe constructive criticism, a relay of popular opinion and adequate feedback from the populace.*
- *To their proprietor, to whom they owe the survival of the media organization as a business venture as well as a veritable source of education, enlightenment and entertainment.*
- *To themselves, to whom they owe fulfillment in their calling, satisfaction and an entire success story. When any of these “judges” of journalistic responsibility is shunted, accountability is dented and automatically, responsibility is affected adversely.”* (Owens-Ibie, 1994)

II - Examples of social responsibility in the media

- Health news reporting: the tangible impacts of irresponsible reporting

In seeking to clarify what it means for the press to be socially responsible and in the interest of improving the media's service toward society, studies have underlined the profound influence that health news reporting can have on citizens' lives. In one analysis of the effectiveness of communication between medical scientists and health news reporters, it was found that in almost all examples of journalists' "*failures to be accurate, to identify vested interests to follow up on stories, and to cover important health issues,*" the negative consequences are ultimately born by patients (Shuchman and Wilkes, 1997).

The authors cite two examples:

1) *In the spring of 1995, news wire services reported that 6 million persons in the United States who were receiving calcium channel blockers for hypertension might be increasing their risk for a heart attack by 60%. Persons who were being treated for hypertension became frightened; in some cases, they stopped taking prescribed medication. Physicians' offices were flooded with calls. (Shuchman and Wilkes, 1997)*

Many criticized that the media coverage was out of proportion with the findings, leading to anxiety and in some cases severe health risks for concerned audiences.

2) The second example emphasizes how, conversely, sowing hope among audiences through the media can wreak just as much havoc as in cases when it triggers anxiety – namely by inaccurately portraying the effectiveness of new treatments:

An unusual and invasive treatment for Alzheimer disease was widely publicized after a small, unblinded pilot study; fluoxetine hydrochloride (Prozac, Dista Products and Eli Lilly and Company, Indianapolis, Indiana) was hailed as a certain cure for depression when it was introduced; and melatonin recently received excessively positive media treatment as a "cure" for aging. (Shuchman and Wilkes, 1997)

The study concludes that in cases like this both journalists and scientists must share the blame for the consequences of having spread false information. Ultimately, the accuracy of health news reporting depends on the reporter's responsibility to take special care in communicating effectively with his or her sources in the medical profession, especially when portraying complex scientific concepts, which can be easily distorted by the journalist and misinterpreted by layperson audiences.

- Journalists in local emergency situations: defining the limits of responsibility

So far, social responsibility theory that emerges from cases such as those brought up in the above study highlights the participation of journalists in furthering public interest, but in general does not so far as to suggest that they join the work of policy-makers. Instead, undertaking policy work could even be viewed as a compromise of journalistic integrity. However, one government experiment on the involvement of journalists in local emergency planning did in fact carry out the definition of social responsibility to a level that some would consider outside its range of appropriateness: media professionals were led to not only inform the public about an emergency, but also to participate in generating an effective policy response.

In this experiment, journalists were included in Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) policy groups that implement local response strategies for chemical emergencies in the United States. The LEPC structure was set in place by the Superfund Amendments Reauthorization Act (SARA) Title III legislation, signed into law by President Reagan on Oct. 17th 1986, with the goal of reducing the likelihood of chemical disaster.

Journalists are usually inserted in this type of project as *“educators, conduits for relaying information through intergovernmental structures and channels to bring citizens’ concerns to official attention. Finally, when communicating to officials in the response/recovery phases, media activities are also seen in terms of highlighting citizen concerns and relaying information among agencies”* (Burkhart, 1991). However, in the LEPC experiment this role was extended to become more active and constitute a determinant factor in the effectiveness of public crisis management. The idea was that *“there are a variety of functions of media that could greatly extend the traditional role, and in doing so enhance the quality of emergency management”* (Burkhart, 1991).

The study by Burkhart was based on interviews with journalists in Arizona who had joined these LEPC policy groups in order to gauge what they perceived as being an appropriate nature and level professional involvement in the process. Their statements revealed that they felt a professional responsibility to play an active role in the response to the emergency situation, and that this responsibility could spread beyond the mere task of informing the citizens about what was happening. These findings revealed that journalists would be willing to explore the possibility of a partnership with emergency planners and officials aimed at improving the practice of hazard management. Ultimately, one could envision a situation in which journalists would be able to choose from a variety of models for carrying out their “social responsibility” through different levels of involvement in public policy and planning organizations (Burkhart, 1991).

III – Is regulation advisable?

- The debate

According to Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003), *“historically, the state has often been perceived as the main enemy of freedom of individual expression, while at the same time it has also become, through constitutions and legal systems, the effective guarantor of freedom in important respects.”* As this statement underscores, there is much controversy regarding the level of involvement that regulatory instances should have in guaranteeing that the media carries out its social responsibilities. Different views of the debate span the spectrum from complete opposition to any formal regulation whatsoever (e.g. self-regulation by the media, with a reference to ethics codes as a normative framework internal to each media organization), to propositions for enforcement of social responsibility in media legislation.

However, regardless of the wide range of differing positions on what constitutes an acceptable level or intensity of regulation, most would agree that the media is obligated to carry out ethical practices, e.g. its social responsibility: *“regardless of whether government-imposed public interest obligations are constitutional, the broadcast media, like the print media, have an ethical obligation to serve the public interest and make a positive contribution to the democratic process”* (Napoli, 2001). It is worth exploring the different ways in which this ethical obligation can be carried out.

- Opting for self-regulation

Anchored in Libertarian press theory with a solid grounding in the ideas of John Stuart Mill, the argument against regulation follows free market principles. Proponents of this view envision the media as a free marketplace of ideas. In line with this stance, one can argue that the natural tension in journalism, between the media’s need to remain neutral and the pressure from groups within society to exert influence, is not objectionable and simply needs to be well managed by the journalists themselves. According to this view, the existence of regulatory commissions, councils, ombudsmen or other frameworks are unnecessary: what we perceive as an accountability problem in the media is in fact *“the natural and healthy tension created by journalistic autonomy in relation to various community groups.”* Following this perspective, *“much of the debate on media accountability has focused on efforts to neutralize the tension between journalistic autonomy and the need for a responsible press. However, the nature of media accountability depends precisely on this conflict, which is not a dilemma to be solved but a healthy tension to be managed.”* (Plaisance, 2000).

Self-regulation is more or less effective depending on the individual journalist or media organization, and lies at the mercy of the media professionals’ consciences. The most

radical advocates of self-regulation argue for *antinomianism*, a form of non-ethics approach that opposes the implementation of any explicit rules. This view assumes that journalists make their decisions intuitively, spontaneously, and do not need regulation. (Kova, 2008)

However, there have been more structured attempts at self-regulation: for example regulatory-like institutions that carry out a role similar to that of organizations like the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the United States, but are not governmental and instead are constituted essentially by journalists who monitor their peers. This is the case of the *Observatoire de déontologie et de l'éthique dans les médias* (ODEM) in Benin, West Africa – an interesting potential case study for a self-regulatory structure, especially since it has taken place in a developing country.

- Questioning the self-regulation model

The basis of self-regulation in journalism lies in the existence of ethics codes, whose actual impact on ethical standards in media organizations is largely questionable – especially given that a certain portion of journalists are not fully aware of their content, and there is no formal structure to ethics code violations. The risk when dealing with ethics codes in journalism is to assume that their mere existence guarantees thorough application of ethical principles; one could maintain instead that the most effective formulation of an ethics code would take place not in writing, but ultimately through the status quo of what decisions and actions journalists perceive as being ethical and therefore carry out in the practice of their work.

Like many others in the field, Plaisance (2000) questions the reliability of ethical practices that are supposedly guaranteed by written ethics codes: “*professional codes of ethics have become popular among news organizations as a demonstration of accountability. However, reliance on codes generates significant suspicion that they often are used to merely put an ethics veneer over questionable behavior.*”

A similar idea was brought up during an Ethics and Human Rights in Information Society conference at UNESCO, by Rodotà (2007): *Codes of ethics have been spawned in the most diverse sectors and feature, at times, considerable ambiguities. Indeed, some of them are ultimately little more than proclamations devoid of concrete effects and are only used to convey a reassuring image of the organizations that have drafted them.*

In this case, the implementation and effectiveness of ethics codes in practice depends on the individual journalists’ attention to the significance of ethical reporting for their society. Whether they can carry out responsible journalism on their own, or on the contrary need a regulatory instance controlling them, remains largely subject to debate. Some would argue that interest group pressures are such that the journalists are not independent in their editorial lines even if they strive to be, and thus need a juridical structure to back them in carrying out socially responsible decisions which might not

always comply with these pressures. A most central example is the commercial interest of their own news organization, which can easily conflict with the ability to carry out responsible journalism: *“in other words, the media may be less likely to strive to uphold a “self-imposed” responsibility to reflect the diversity of the communities they serve if it is more lucrative to shape content to satisfy commercial needs to reach certain fragmented audiences”* (Plaisance, 2000).

- Preventing the media’s violation of SR: a bold step into regulation

On the other end of the spectrum, in terms of flagrant violation of social responsibility, typical examples occur when the media deliberately supports a cause (often for commercial reasons) that is contrary to public interest. A notable instance of this was pointed out in a case study of the Indian tobacco industry and its use of the media as a promotion tool.

The author of the study emphasized how the media can contribute significantly towards worsening or curbing the tobacco epidemic, depending on the level of social responsibility its editors take on. If editors let their media organization become exploited as a promotion tool for a target industry such as the tobacco, regulation might step in and impose comprehensive bans on certain kinds of publicity. In support of this proposition for regulation, the author notes that *“studies across different countries concluded that banning advertising resulted in reductions in consumption of 4 - 9 %”* (Srivastava, 2000).

Other means of prevention for this type of hijacking of the media by commercial interests again public interest include mobilizing the media itself to advocate the public health argument against tobacco, so that the media becomes a partner and champion of a wide tobacco control program.

More specifically, methods might involve the following, according to the study:

- a) Action on a global basis with key media companies and organizations that provide access to audiences across borders through satellite transmission .*
- b) Running a multi-media campaign that increases the awareness of the health benefits of non-smoking ,both active and passive .*
- c) Countering the lobbying efforts of the tobacco industry through effective media advocacy.*
- d) Monitoring and auditing the use of media by tobacco industry to ensure enforcement and compliance with existing and new laws. (Srivastava, 2000)*

These types of preventive procedures constitute a first step in controlling the extent to which the media is carrying out its responsibility toward the public. But the debate on regulation, and whether it is appropriate that laws be applied as a means to enforce social responsibility in the media, remains controversial.

Avenues for future research

The next step in exploring the concept of social responsibility in the media is to assess specifically which aspects of current media regulation/legislation pertain to issues of social responsibility, and how they have been applied. The main challenge for formal regulators of media ethics lies in the fact that defining the nature of social responsibility in the context of the media's role in society is an overly qualitative and normative task. Attempts at effective regulatory or co-regulatory frameworks are still in the making, and struggle with the difficulty in setting clear principles and boundaries for what should be expected or permitted by the law in terms of social responsibility in the media. And as in many fields of law, prospects for a universal juridical framework to enforce social responsibility in the media are still scarce. In the meantime, many in favor of self-regulation would argue that initiatives toward implementing such types of coercive structures are altogether undesirable in the first place.

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