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ETHIC NORMS OF WORKING WITH SOURCES

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to clarify the definition of moral and ethic standards of self-regulation of journalistic activities 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 “Journalistic self-regulation” and “Press self-regulation” mean in the field of media, one becomes better equipped to formulate professional ethics that is effective and holds the potential to understanding ethic standards and problems of human activities in the modern information space. Its aim is to study fundamental human rights and obligations on gaining and transferring the information, the main forms, mechanisms and directions of ethic control on information. The media service ethic code clearly formulates journalists’ obligations, permissions and prohibitions.

I.

Self-regulation of human life is based on the interpretations of right and wrong behavioral concepts. Moral relations among humans and ethic standards are the basis of self-regulation of journalistic activities as well. “Journalistic self-regulation” and “Press self-regulation” are long existing terms in the media space. Professional ethics in mass media serves to understanding ethic standards and problems of human activities in modern information space. Its aim is to study fundamental human rights and obligations on gaining and transferring the information, the main forms, mechanisms and directions of ethic control on information. The media service ethic code clearly formulates journalists’ obligations, permissions and prohibitions.

The problem of self-regulation should be dealt within the context of freedom and responsibility. Responsibility does not mean blind obedience towards a boss; on the contrary, it is a pro-public professional but free, sensible and reasonable action.

The process of creating and formulating moral-ethical codes for defining journalists’ behavior is a live and creative one. The contents of these norms differ in accordance with the

cultural development. And different are the approaches as to how the reports should be made, for instance, about underage criminals or what position a journalist should have while presenting elections; whether it is allowed to eavesdrop/listen, record and then use a TV conversation, etc. The Austrian code disapproves “human threatening”, the Belgian one – “demands not to glorify crimes, terror or other kinds of acts of violence”. The staff of the “Washington Post” signed the document prohibiting wire tapping and friendly relations with high officials. In Greece it is inadmissible to accept a present from a journalist. A correspondent is obliged to refuse all kinds of personal benefits. Thus, the laws are conditional and as important as a journalist’s honesty. Clarity, precision and fairness of opinion or fact confirmation are the preparatory principles for a quality journalistic product.

Negligence of these standards and principles create awkward situation to the leading mass media. Thus, for example, over 100 subscribers have annulled agreements with the Dutch newspaper “Telegraph” because the newspaper published the photos and a telephone interview with a 9-year-old Dutch boy who was the only survivor of the terrible plane crash in Libya. The public considered the bothering of an under-aged boy under stressed situation was unethical; moreover, that he knew nothing about his parents at that time.

As an illustration of the ethic standards of working with sources we will analyze the case of a world-known newspaper “Bild”. In 1977, Wallraff began to work in the Hanover office of Springer’s newspaper “Bild” under the name of Hans Esser. He revealed a number of infringes in connection with the information entering the newspaper. He published the results of his research in a book *Der Aufmacher – Der Mann, der bei „Bild“ Hans Esser war* (1977). The publishing house “Springer-Verlag” sued at court against the journalist: there was a federal court trial which made a verdict according to which each journalist should choose what is more important for them – public value of their future publications or working under false names. In Wallraff’s case the court judged the following way: “Disclosure and evaluation of such a crime (that Wallraff has investigated) is the result for which the main law acknowledges freedom of speech. *“Such infringes harm the entire law and order of the country more than the circumstance that on publishing the information it becomes clear from the very beginning that it is gained illegally”*. At the same time, Günter Wallraff was prohibited to publish materials on private life of the former head of the “Bild” office which he acquired from staying in the house of this person. Wallraff was also told that one fragment of the book should not have been published at all. In this situation the part of the Press Law enters the force according to which confidentiality of the editorial activities should be

observed. Otherwise, it might bring great harm to the publishing house “Springer-Verlag” as well as the whole country’s law and order.

The journalist’s “characters” are often such people whose actions, to say it mildly, do not coincide with public interest and existing laws. Does it mean that during the relationship with them or while describing their activities journalists should forget the moral standards and norms existing in the society? Are they allowed to write what they wish about their “heroes”? – Journalists can write anything that clarify this kind of criminal actions and show the degree of danger to the society but nothing more than this.

How should a journalist behave if he/she wants to show something from the private life of an official who is disclosed in corruption relations the public is interested in? Does it deserve public discussion?

Ethic demands that journalists should observe are well-formulated in inter-corporate code – “Recommendations for BBC Producers – 2000”. Thus, for instance, “BBC should respect people’s privacy except for cases if, say, they serve highly noble purposes. Private actions, correspondence, negotiations should not become public property unless they are justified by wider public interests” (5, Chapter 4).

Unfortunately, many journalists sometimes forget that the concepts “public interest” and “interests of society” are quite different ones. At the same time, next to the high-professionally made journalistic investigation we can meet such facts of investigation that do not correspond to this genre and can be considered as tabloid material by showing nuances of private life in details. *“In case of such “investigations” authors violate not only ethic standards but the Constitution as well according to which the privacy of the country’s population is guaranteed and it is specified in the relevant Chapter of Criminal Code: Article 142, “Crime against Human Rights and Freedoms” and is punishable by fine or by corrective labor for a term not exceeding one year or by imprisonment for up to two years in length.”*

Journalist-investigator can conduct relations with the “characters” of investigation according to the norms formulated in “Ethical Standards Code”.

In democratic countries, the code created for protection of ethical standards do not imply criminal liability of violators but without this journalists will not be able to form ethical and trustworthy media. Trust and respect are necessary for journalists to serve the society well. They should not only be reliable but independent as well. Nowadays, journalists cannot only fight against political and economic pressure.

The conception of moral regulation has been created in Georgia too (for example, Public Broadcasting Code of Conduct, Journalists' Charter...). However, there rises a question – are these documents of ethical code of such a quality on the basis of which journalists can work properly?

It requires supplementary means through which proper work can be achieved. It can be called standards of mass media obligations. All of them have got one common feature: their goal is to have democratic media that meets public needs. Among the systems of journalistic obligations are such individuals as a newspaper “ombudsman”, structural groups: TV, radio, press reporters' associations.

These standards are not efficient in all the situations but the main thing is that all of them are harmless, i.e. they do not cause any damage. Enforcement of each of them is stipulated by society and it does not depend on state bureaucracy. The second positive feature is their diversity. These systems utilize criticism, monitoring, trainings or their combinations. Some are created directly at media, others – independent of media. Systems responsible for media function on local, regional, national, international or all four levels simultaneously. Mass Media responsibility systems easily adjust to situations and are able to conduct joint work.

As soon as journalists learn about such rules, they often express negative attitude towards novelty. Accentuation of specialization locks the external criticism and avoids self-criticism as well. Serious revealing opinion explains why a frank, competent journalist becomes enemy to the systems of media obligations: the reason is that these standards impose obligations and duties onto the journalists as well on all the negative features mass media is characterized by. Some of the media representatives express their opinions in such a way: they are professionals, independent and employees. Therefore they should not be hold responsible. Journalists conduct petty sins whereas mass media commits big sins.

The main reason for the media obligation rules is not only to refine journalism but return faith to the public as well. Journalists need respect in order to fight against political and economic oppression. Public trust is an essential condition for achieving this goal.

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