JOURNALISTIC ETHICS: THE RISE OF THE "GOOD EMPLOYEE’S MODEL": A THREAT FOR PROFESSIONALISM?

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The construction of a formal discourse on ethics is a direct contribution to the formation of identity within and outside a would-be professional group. Three successive approaches struggled and finally mixed to form the ethics that has, since the 1950s, expressed the idealized moral independence of journalists from the commercial interests of the media. In Quebec, that dominant conception is currently being challenged by the rise of a "good employee’s model" which in turn challenges the quasi-professional status of journalists.

La construction d’un discours éthique contribue à la formation de l’identité collective des travailleurs qui aspirent au statut de professionnels. Chez les journalistes, trois conceptions éthiques se sont opposées et finalement mariées pour former le discours qui, depuis les années ’50, exprime un idéal d’indépendance par rapport aux intérêts commerciaux des médias. Au Québec, la prééminence de cette éthique est actuellement menacée par la montée d’un modèle centré sur le "bon employé", un changement qui mine le statut de quasi-professionnels atteint par les journalistes à la fin des années ’60.

Claude-Jean Bertrand, a well known French commentator of the media scene in America recently wrote: "One impression a European observer gets of the American media in the mid-1980s is that they are running scared. They seem terribly concerned about their credibility, about the hostility which the public is claimed to feel towards them." (Bertrand, 1987 : 17). And he goes to expose the growing interest in ethics, at the highest levels of media management, as a response to growing criticism. The move is not new. Ever since its birth, the media have cloaked their activities with a rhetoric of public service and ethical standards to
improve public relations. One can even claim that, in a sense, private media industries proclaim respectability and civic responsibility, in order to justify a private production apparatus for satisfying the public need for information.

The province of Quebec has not recently (or ever?) experienced the equivalent of a Janet Cooke affair, or a propaganda situation like the Grenada invasion, let alone a libel suit by a person of national stature like General Westmoreland. But, in spite of the barrier of the (French) language, Quebec is part of the North American continental economy and is culturally at the pace with the United States. So, it is easy to interpret recent events on the media scene in French Canada as expressions of the same defensive civic responsibility trend as those found outside of the province. Among these are June 1987 decision of the editor of LA PRESSE, Montreal’s second French language daily, to enforce a set of ethical conflict of interest guidelines which were publicized in the proper circles. These forbid gifts from potential sources, trips paid by somebody other than the newspaper and sidelines for editorial employees (LA PRESSE, 1987). The same civic responsibility interpretation could be invoked with respect to the "Charte du journalisme" adopted in December 1987 by the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ), the province’s main professional organization. That "Charte", a kind of Code of ethics that contains 11 articles, was adopted without real debate among journalists, some even say: without real conviction (FPJQ, 1988).

But more important than these events are long term trends which seem to indicate that the French-Canadian media and their journalists are not as beleaguered as their American counterparts. Primary among these, are the profound economic and cultural changes that are transforming the Quebec media industry as they are the rest of the western world. These forces seem to push in two apparently contradictory directions: toward an ever growing concentration of ownership at the multinational level and, at the same time, toward a proliferation of (the same) products at the consumer level. The multiplication of titles resulting from technological developments and the narrowing of each individual market have decreased the growth of general news media and increased opportunities for specialised media that market a very specific style or sound. Increased refinements in marketing techniques enables these media to pinpoint their customers more and more effectively. The result is a new burst of competition which makes use of recent technological advances in the fields of telecommunications and computerisation.

What may be considered particular to Québec is that these trends became full-blown realities in the first half of the 1980s amid the political depression that followed the failure of the nationalist fervor that dominated the intellectual scene during the preceding two decades. Undoubtedly, the resulting change in the socio-cultural and technological environment have also affected the ways in which
French-Canadian journalists view their social role. These changes are best chronicled in the changing discourse on ethics.

This article examines these changes based on the following three propositions:

a) It makes sense to talk of ethics for journalists only if we consider that they as a group engage in a particular activity which is in need of moral guidance. In that light, the ethics of journalism will be different from those of ordinary citizen, or other wage earners. This does not mean that journalists do not have to follow accepted personal ethical practices. It simply emphasizes that his or her professional ethics address specific areas of social responsibility.

b) There will also be a radical difference between the ethics espoused by the professional group called journalists, even though they are salaried and not liberal entrepreneurs, and the ethics promoted by media corporations, even if a large part of the contents of these ethics are acceptable to journalists and even if the managers of the media are journalists.

This proposition is important to the argument in that it points up the situation of the "dependent professional" which journalists find themselves by virtue of their status as employees. There is "dependency" in at least two senses: financial and moral because the media industries, their employers, have the legal obligation to provide information within the framework of a free press. As a consequence journalists either succeed in justifying their activity in terms of their own professional values or they fall within the moral definitions of their duties and ideals, drawn up by the media. In short, to be considered a professional group, journalists must be able to formulate their own standards in terms of their own social mission, rather than simply adhere to the standards, explicit or implicit, of the corporations that hire them.

c) In North America, three historically situated sets of values competed in the past, and produced the dominant ethical model which has undergirded journalistic activity and legitimated the social existence of the trade. In Quebec this model developed in opposition to media industries, taking on an "adversarial stance" which strengthened the journalists' own discourses and organisations. But that dominant model is rapidly losing ground to a modern version of the "good employee's" ethic which seems to leave no room for moral independence from the employing corporations and consequently no place for an autonomous professional status.

A Would be Profession

During the past two centuries it was believed that journalistic activity required distinctive technical knowledge and skills as well as an intellectual formation beyond that of general culture. Gradually, practitioners in the field created
professional associations, clubs and specialized publications. At the turn of the
century, journalism became a separate field in teaching institutions. Scholars began
to identify the intellectual and technical requirements of the field, scrutinized
journalistic practice and converted it into an organized system of knowledge which
could be taught as opposed to being acquired "on the job". As a result, journalists
began to be classed as a distinctive professional group and their sense of
self-identity grew in proportion.

It must be noted here that the word "professional" is ambiguous. It refers to a
variety of general as well as specific components. On the general level a profes-
sional is someone who earns a living from a particular occupation. Here the mean-
ing refers to an opposition with the amateur. Another definition states that a
professional is someone who acts professionally, that is with technical mastery and
a concern for well done work. For a journalist, that would mean mastery of such
routine skills as factual accuracy, speed at meeting deadlines, style in presentation,
a shared set of news values, and so on. These two meanings of the term can be
equally well applied to the subordinate status of the hired technician. The profes-
sionalism discussed here includes the first two meanings of the term, but it also
refers to types of social behavior associated with journalism, the social cohesion
of the group itself, and its status relative to other groups.

"We define the professional", writes Esther Dém, "as a person preoccupied,
among other things, by liberty and professional autonomy in his activities, and by
final control of his activities by his peers (and by the public) rather than by his
hierarchical superiors, without denying their importance on other aspects." (1987:
21-22, my translation). At this level, professionalism is much more a process, a
struggle for something rather than something already achieved. For this reason the
struggle journalistic toward "professionalism" creates unease among media
employers who fear the potential independence of their employees if they adopted
a spiritual attitude similar to that of doctors or lawyers.

Stating that journalists have a professional responsibility as a specific group
of employees means that they are allowed not only a certain technical freedom of
action in their everyday work, but also a certain power in designing the way in
which every publishing or broadcasting operation intervenes socially. For those
who claim journalists are mere executants, or even worse, who deny them any
autonomy whatsoever, the matter of professional ethics has but one meaning: are
they or are they not doing their job in terms of the technical standards of the craft
and the ethical standards of their media employer. For those who, on the contrary,
state that journalists have small spaces of liberty even in rigidly supervised press
enterprises and that they should demand even more on behalf of the public's right
to information, ethics symbolizes an ideal of professional practice and a tool with
which to create an autonomous profession. The persistent demand for liberty and
autonomy, a formal discourse on ethics, may already be a valid criterion for
considering journalism as a profession, even though this "trade" as yet lacks other professional qualities.

Medicine, law and engineering have already attained the legal status of professions. Journalists, for their part, at least in Canada, are still considered common citizens in the eye of the law. Traditional professions rest on the privileged relationship between a professional and his client, while journalists are defined in terms of their relationship with a collectivity, even though they have individual clients such as employers and sources. Doctors, lawyers and engineers have their conduct supervised through peer committees which evaluate their activities in accordance with the corporation's rules and an official code of ethics. They may also inflict sanctions (Dussault and O'Neil, 1977). Professional associations furthermore control the quality of the professional acts of their members, access to the professional title and thereby to practice. In addition a system of values to which professionals are requested to adhere, have been codified into a formal code of ethics. All together these features of accepted professions create a corporative system which is publicly justified on the grounds that it protects consumers from a power used in secrecy and from a practice that only fellow-members can really understand and value. In the case of journalism and its practices, in contrast, there are no such protective rules and anyone seems to be allowed to judge the quality of their work.

Journalists, for their part, are sometimes judged by public opinion, ombudsmen or press councils, but the sanctions these bodies impose are only moral ones. If they are punished, it is by their employers or by the courts. Journalists not only do not constitute a corporation, but the majority of them are salaried workers. Invoking their own professional ethics and their own social mission puts them in conflict with their employers. This does not negate the fact that journalists are bound by a kind of moral loyalty to the enterprise that hires them and that good-quality work must be exchanged for the salary obtained. Journalists must also not intentionally hinder the operation of the enterprise, a duty which is not unique to media employees but applies to all workers in any field. So the evolution of a coherent set of rules to form an ethic is one of the means through which journalists have tried to strengthen their collective social position. And this was done mostly by making their moral rules explicit.

It is probably because of the importance of the informal side of ethical training that many critics of journalism teaching believe that apprenticeship while working is superior to any academic formula as the best way for journalism students be socialized into their chosen profession. Formal teaching, they will argue, obtains little success in regard to internal compliance, even when the teacher is a personality able to build a fan club, even when the Journalism School attempts to faithfully reproduce the reality of the newsroom, and even when a collection of
heroes, portraits of celebrity journalists, can be presented to students through films and documentaries.

Ethics are in large part acquired informally through socialisation in the newsroom. During this training, the beginner day after day absorbs the values of the environment. The newcomer will identify emotionally with other journalists who act as role models. In the working situation penalties, explicit or not, and rewards distinguish unacceptable from valued behaviors. In short, the journalistic neophyte will learn ethics by breathing it, the same way a junior gets journalistic flair imitating senior members of the team, modeling his sensibility on theirs, training himself to look at the world the way they do. Sound judgment together with the feeling for news become a reflex, a kind of sixth sense intermingled with the consciousness of being part of the group.

This description indicates that the moral formation acquired "on the job" is of a very local nature. The ways of a specific newsroom and the micro-culture it creates usually differ much from those of other media and frequently transmit values which serves the commercial purposes of the individual media outlets. Differences are particularly evident in the values accepted by the general press and the specialised press and between the popular press and the "quality press". These differences persist even though the standardised procedures of industrial news production and the growing uniformity of news material sources are beginning to undermine these differences.

More important for our argument however is the formal dimension of ethical training, which focuses on the normative bases of a given ethic. This investigates the collective and cultural choices which have led to the promotion of certain behaviors and condemnation of others. The dictionary corroborates the action orientation of ethics by defining it as the "science of morals, art of behaviour". Such a definition indicates that ethics is on the one hand an instrument to guide action and on the other hand a set of choices made according to normative distinctions between good and evil. The "science of morals", component furthermore elaborates that ethics is more than a list of duties and moral commandments. It incorporates the foundations of morals, the hazy realm of values and ideals -not to mention "essential myths" (Paquet, 1986: 75) from which codes of honour and morality are deduced. It is from this source that beliefs about what life and journalism should be originate. That is the main reason why the domain of ethics has become such a battlefield where, in spite of his or her neutral, professional role, the journalist must takes sides for an ideal society.

In these circumstances learning rhetoric of ethics, both offensive and defensive, is a professional necessity for the contemporary journalist. Being at the center of the message producing process, the journalist is continually submitted to contradictory pressures from employers, sources, friends, etc. An enunciated set
of ethic values are indispensable in mediating these contradictions. Also, ethics are frequently used by others (employers, sources or the public) in a self-interested attempt to tame journalists for their own purposes. The genuine territory of professional ethics is the one governed by "opinion" in the sense used by John Stuart Mill (McKercher, 1988). It refers to the realm of opinions which should proceed from personal convictions rather than from fear of punishment. And if there have to be penalties, let them be reduced to moral culpability and collective reprobation by (public) "opinion", or to personal guilty conscience, tarnished reputation, social boycott and reproof by a tribunal of peers like a Press Council, etc.

Essential Myths

What are the main features of the various normative models of journalistic ethics that are so intimately linked to the idea of the journalist as an autonomous professional which are challenged today? The most central features derive from the opinion press of the XVIII and XIX centuries, which enunciated freedom of speech as the quintessential mark of the activity of the publisher, a freedom that had to prevail against censorship, by king or church. From the journalistic point of view this implies support for the principle that all opinions expression is socially legitimate. It also implies rejection of legal barriers on freedom of speech such as forbidding hate literature, protecting individuals against slander and libel, defending individual rights by so-called Charters of Rights, etc.

Journalists subscribing to the first version of a normative model take literally the liberal assumption according to which every citizen is an adult provided with a grown-up's judgment and understanding. They will, in general, support freedom of the press, that is the institutional form of freedom of speech. Because of these principles however such journalists may also turn against the owners of the media, who are the de facto implementors of freedom of the press, in order to have their own freedom of speech acknowledged (MacFarlane and Martin, 1982). For them then proclaiming professional status means that freedom of the press pertains (principally?) to media workers, and only secondarily the entrepreneurs. (Merrill, 1985 and 1986).

Because of its insistence first and foremost on the freedom of the commentator, this school of thought is close to that supporting artistic freedom, which justifies the total absence of rules as necessary preconditions for the creative process. It will logically emphasize the authenticity of proclaimed opinions. The truth to be conveyed, in journalistic work is not a precise reflection of "reality" existing independently from the media and the journalists, but rather a faithful rendition of the real opinions of columnists, critics or editorialists. The ethics of freedom of speech in this version boils down to an ethics of honesty. Journalists fight openly for their point of view and, in doing so behave in a socially responsible manner. In the marketplace of ideas displayed by the media, hypotheses and invective,
along with blunders, bias and partisanship are essential ingredients for the constitutional democratic life (Guénéte, 1987).

A more recent tradition (second half of the XIXth century), is directly related to the reporting activity rather than to editorializing. It adapts freedom of speech the commercial press, the so-called information press. This tradition requires of the media only that they circulate the information that the consumer will buy. It did not emerge until the economic possibility existed for newspapers to survive financially by selling their product to advertisers and consumers. In the process news became viewed as a commodity. The journalistic mission in this context became redefined as "excavating" society in order to find therein anything of interest to the consumer. In the process the reporter practise the ascetism of neutrality and commits himself to the search for truth in the accurate account of events. In this tradition the reporter's ethic is one of objectivity, and information production a process which is free from the opinions of both journalists and their employers. In this setting opinions are formally eliminated from reports by locking up them in the editorial space.

The Dominant Model

A third model of the journalistic ethic had its origin in the Hutchins Commission convoked in the United States after World War II. It developed what has become known as the social responsibility theory of the media (Siebert et al., 1956). This conception derives from the growth of monopolies, oligopolies and the concentration of ownership in the press which put an end to the free market of ideas. This model extends the idea of news as "objective data" which reporters are entrusted to circulate without distortion in order to fulfill their public service function. The social responsibility theory also contributed to the development of the idea of the public's right to that service. Many intellectuals tried to use this doctrine as an argument against sensationalism and stressed the obligation of the media to search for and publish only socially important news. Accordingly, they claimed most of the energies of the media should be devoted to investigative reporting of political institutions.

Gradually, these three different models of the journalistic ethic which were built on very different assumptions were blended into a mix that idealised journalism into a kind of public service activity. From the era of censorship, it retained the notion of independence, mainly from governments. From the objectivity era, and its cultural environment of scientific positivism, it kept the ideal of personal neutrality and individual thought which incidentally steered journalists away from organising for collective action. The Quebec Press Council (1987: 3) summarizes this tenet as follows: "When media and information professionals evaluate what is and what is not in the public interest, they have to set aside their personal interests and prejudices. Editorial choices are their responsibility. They must be made
independently from any considerations other than those which follow from the exercise of the activity of journalism and from the laws of the land." (Press Council, 1987 : 3, my translation).

The social responsibility era finally made journalists into the guardians of the right to information. It gave reporters as independent individuals the right to fight against their employers' mercantilism, the propaganda distributed by institutional sources of information and the public's morbid curiosity. This interpretation of the freedom of speech ethic will urge journalists to demand their own speech freedom at the risk of "displeasing" their employer. It also supports them in a monopoly or quasi-monopoly situation like a one-paper town to demand that newspapers publish a wide variety of opinions even though this might infringe on the publisher's right of management.

Reporters, following this individualistic ethics will demand the greatest freedom of action possible, not in order to express their own opinions but to investigate any issue including the workings of the enterprise that employs them. Some Quebec reporters even went so far as to demand, if not for themselves as individuals, at least for the collectivity of the editorial staff, the right to decide what to investigate and what topics were to be tackled. Reporters justify this broad definition of choice of subject matter on the grounds that it helps to reveal aspects of outside reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible to public scrutiny. The ethics of social responsibility diminishes the commercial freedom of the enterprise to choose financially viable entertaining content. It defines the publishing task primarily in political terms which emphasises issues relevant to an understanding of democratic life. It invites journalists and the media to educate the public rather than to flatter it.

In summary, each one of the three conceptions of the journalistic ethic argues that journalists should not submit entirely to the commercial interests of the media. They offer three different rationales for the professional autonomy of journalists from the media enterprises that hire them.

**Struggle for influence**

The present retreat from the ethic of journalistic autonomy among the Quebec's journalistic community is in large part explainable by the intellectual depression following the defeat of the nationalist referendum of 1980 and the economic crisis of 1981. This defeat engendered a widespread sense of malaise clearly evident in the anguished testimony of leading journalists published in a special edition of "Le 30" (December 1988) which celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the FPJQ (Le 30, 1988). It also paved the way for Quebec's post referendum philosophy: the ideal of financial success. This mood is evident in a new respect for businessmen, a surge of popularity in economic and business programming in both television...
and the press and an editorial campaign for the entrepreneurial spirit. The renewed faith in free enterprise as the way to social development is also evident in stock holding plans which draw employees into the corporation both financially and spiritually.

In the journalistic milieu, these changed socio-political circumstances provided the context for a new model of behavior which might be called the "good employee's model". The rise of this model, two or three years ago, coincided with a wave of media interest in Japanese industrial relations a phenomenon which some commentators branded the "Japanese syndrome" (Guay, 1986). Media reports described the employer-employee relations in the Japanese corporation as enlightened paternalism in which the employees' total devotion is rewarded with lifelong financial security. Supposedly, that devotion also contributed to the international success of Japanese corporations.

We argue here that the "good employee's model" represents a threat for journalistic autonomy and professionalism because it undermines the group's will to counterbalance the commercial incentives of the media corporations. This is accomplished through a fundamental change in the ethics of the trade. Firstly, it subordinates the individual's ethical framework to the interests of the company itself. In a conflict, the individual's moral obligation, including professional values are outweighed for the true employee by the employer's interests. Secondly, it strengthens the social position of media enterprises in claiming that they are the sole guardians of the information transmission function in modern society. Particularly in Quebec, the "good employee's model" undermines the hard won gains in professional autonomy which journalists had acquired by challenging their employers on the issues of information as a public service.

The different interpretations of "public service" offered by French and English Canadians is well documented by Lysiane Gagnon (1981). She points to such factors as the Cartesian mentality inherited from French culture; the clerical attitude of the intellectual elites; and an intellectual tradition which aims to "form" rather than to "inform". She also mentions the importance granted to politics in French culture, to a fondness for collective rights and to support for State intervention. Added to this there was the rapid concentration of the press in Quebec at the end of the 1960s which Gagnon fails to mention as a triggering point for the confrontation between media owners and intellectuals. She merely remarks that: "The phenomenon of concentration began to become apparent at the very height of political and labor dissatisfaction, which may be said to have been much stronger in Québec than everywhere in Canada." (Gagnon, 1981: 24).

What she does not note is that, in the political confrontation, the media and their owners were clearly identified with the conservative forces, the federalists, the opponents of a strong Quebec State, the authoritarians, etc. The main
demarcation line in all of these confrontations was nationalism in all its forms. In the media industry, the confrontation was strong enough to fuel the creation of not one but two federations of journalists, the FPJQ and the Fédération Nationale des Communications (FNC), affiliated to the CNTU. The latter groups together most of the unions of journalists and other unionized media employees in Québec. The FPJQ, founded in 1969, has a membership of about 1 000 and the FNC, created in 1972, has more than 5 000 members. Both of these organisations promoted a much more radical interpretation of information as a public service than the social responsibility theory (Demers, 1988). They still consider themselves the main (if not the real) advocates of the public’s right to know. In certain occasions in the 1970s, their advocacy even confronted the liberty of the press invoked by the media.

The new 1980’s socio-political environment as we have seen has undermined that spirit. With financial success as the main value the notion of the "public interest" has become reduced to "what interests the public". Translated into media content, this means that media marketing departments and business managers now control the type of information which will be published. It is generally known that "entertainment" packaging has reduced the hard news focus in most papers. The new environment has also elevated the "good employee" model to prominence which defines journalism as nothing more than a job without any moral responsibility beyond producing technically competent work. In such a situation, there is no way of distinguishing between the professional ethics of information workers and the social responsibility of corporate media institutions. The role of professional ethic is precisely to establish the boundaries of the media’s social responsibility and consequently the limits of their power. Turning ethical questions over to the media furthermore entitles press employers to lay down "their" ethical code to "their" journalists making them part of the public relations cadre of these enterprises.

In such a situation, journalists can no longer be viewed as potential allies of the public, nor should they count on their support against the media. Because without a separate ethic, the public can no longer judge how journalists intend to use their professional liberty, however small it may be. Thus, for example, partisans of objectivity are supported by common sense and the average reader. Those who subscribe to the social responsibility ethic are helped by well-meaning intellectuals. And journalists who favour an opinion ethic and subjectivity are sustained by readers who believe in the values of democracy and public service. (Cherry, 1985 and Sauvageau, 1981).

In the public discussion about the media today the options seem to be narrowing. Those who believe in the social responsibility of the press include many politicians, well-meaning pressure groups and some prestigious journalists from the quality press, who wish to "educate" the public. But this position is losing
ground. On the other side, are the partisans of information that seduces the consumer. They comprise most managers and a loose grouping of all those who oppose any hindrance to liberty, as a matter of principle. Together, they support a commercial version of the public's right to information which is anchored in nothing more than what the public is willing to buy in a very competitive market. We have already noted that the journalist's responsibility in this setting is to look for the story that will please the largest number of consumers because this will improve the position in the market of the business that hired him. Whether the "good employee's" model as the dominant journalistic ethic will be as useful to the public is highly doubtful. I would argue that it is not and that it may in fact constitute a threat to democracy. Society will be better off if journalists remain highly critical of the social performance of the product they are paid to produce by the media corporations. Only so will there be any counterbalance to the economic weight of the multinationals and the mercantile approach of the media corporations.

There are few alternatives for assuring journalistic independence in Quebec short of legally creating a formal profession which would establish a code of ethics separate from that espoused by media corporations. Such an ethic designed for professionals will provide a foundation for sorting out and defending the meaning of the right to free expression in a democratic society. Historically this has meant more than publishing just any opinion, however immoral, stupid or simply in bad taste. It has included the idea that the major task of journalists is to disseminate the kind of information which illuminates collective choices. Only in such a broader democratic political framework can other ethical issues of journalism practice be sorted out. Chief among these are conflicts of interest, relations with sources, protection of privacy, responsibilities toward the police and the legal system and cooperation with colleagues. The "good employee's" ethic is silent on these and other issues of public concern such as sensationalism, concentration of ownership and the social role of journalist associations.

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