

# Teaching communication ethics: improving the philosophical mind

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## *Enseñar ética de la comunicación: fortalecer el discurso filosófico*

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Abstract:

This essay reflects on the need to develop a more in-depth level of theoretical knowledge and to build upon the capacity for critical reasoning by way of different curriculum subjects in order to further the ethical training of students of journalism. To achieve this goal, attention must be afforded to humanistic matters such as the principles behind politics, rights and social ethics, as well as different epistemological levels of reasoning, and social justice must be shown to be a key to ethical reasoning. Case studies which help apply those theoretical principles in resolving specific problems that develop the sense of equity among students are also a valuable tool.

Keywords:

Ethical training, humanistic matters, critical reasoning, social justice, journalistic ethics.

*Resumen:*

*Este texto reflexiona sobre la necesidad de ampliar y ahondar en los conocimientos teóricos, así como de cimentar la capacidad de razonamiento crítico por medio de las diferentes materias del currículo, con el fin de mejorar la formación ética de los estudiantes de periodismo. Para lograr este objetivo, es necesario prestar atención a cuestiones humanísticas tales como los principios que inspiran la política, los derechos y la ética social, así como a los diferentes niveles epistemológicos del razonamiento y mostrar el valor de la justicia social como clave del razonamiento ético. El estudio de casos constituye una herramienta valiosa que ayuda a aplicar estos principios teóricos a la solución de problemas concretos y favorece desarrollar el sentido de la equidad entre los estudiantes.*

*Palabras Clave:*

*Formación ética, cuestiones humanísticas, razonamiento crítico, justicia social, ética periodística*

## 1. Broadening the Philosophical Mind

In the 2007 Media Ethics Summit, Clifford Christians suggested that a further step in the ethical training given to communication professionals was necessary and encouraged the skill be built upon substantially. He put forward the goal of achieving university education with a philosophical mind, for which the foundations of knowledge and its presuppositions are paramount (Christians, 2007: 46-47). This proposal seeks to build upon and develop a more in-depth capacity for reasoning.

The Greek words *deontos logos* mean the science of duty, which belongs to the philosophical context of utilitarianism (Bentham, 2005), referring to the duties entailed in a certain liberal profession. However, according to Christians, “the dominance of utility makes it enormously difficult to develop critical thinking in the classroom and sophisticated ethics in our theorizing”. In fact, “models of utilitarianism emphasizing long-term consequences would not be trapped in the media’s day-to-day quandaries” (2007: 113).

If utilitarianism presumes no foundational or universal propositions, according to Aristotle, communication ethics as a science should indicate its principles and the causes of the duties (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI 3, 30-35; and *Metaphysics* I, 981 b, 27-28). The professional praxis validates the operative character of a certain norm, but this demands reflection upon the good it entails. The limited character of the norm itself, which is not self-explanatory, demands interpretation and application by giving a proper answer in each situation. Interpretation implies understanding its meaning and its foundation. It implies explaining the rationality of the action, which also has a public dimension, and which in this case justifies the existence of a profession.

Journalistic ethics must answer a question concerning the fulfilment of the good that is correlative to the professional decision: this is how it guides the actions of a professional. Its professional nature means that it heeds the ethical obligations that stem specifically from the profession. According to Christians, “claiming that moral acts are duties is to say that a dutiful act itself fosters an integration of personhood and community” (2007: 121).

Professional work is a source of ethical obligations, which have been clear to the professional conscience in different social contexts throughout history and which generate changes that force new forms of professional practice. Journalistic ethics sets forth some operative criteria which have been consolidated as standards of professional behaviour. These allow for the proper and rapid resolution of complex situations, in which the professional conscience perceives a risk to achieving the good intrinsic to the journalist’s professional conduct.

Therefore, taking the anthropological and social structure of public communication actions<sup>1</sup> into account, some common elements may be found, which allow us to determine some ethical constants:

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the idea of communication, see Peters, J. D., (1999), *Speaking into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication*,

- (1) As a human action, the ethical dimension of human behaviour extends to professional practice.
- (2) With more or less freedom, in a different cultural, political or economic context, the task of providing information is a public service function that corresponds to those professionals that freely accept it.
- (3) Journalistic activity is justified by its condition as a public service function, which has the public good in mind, i.e. it is carried out for the good of the people.
- (4) Public communication is not a simple mediation technique, but fundamentally a public action.
- (5) Public communication always refers to the pillars of social life: education, economy, legislation, politics, religion and culture.
- (6) The social function of media groups includes elements that require endeavours to establish just social relations, as justice is the virtue that orders the relations of equality between citizens.

The aforementioned elements could guide professional action and afford it a universal meaning within different social, cultural, economic and political contexts. At the same time, the profession must respond to changing social relations and technical changes, which lead to enormous differences in the scope and even in the meaning of communication activities. For this reason, the anthropological and social dimensions of public communication must be extended throughout the entire formative curriculum.

## **2. Teaching at the three levels of ethical reasoning**

Today, digital technology constitutes the trigger behind social change, which presents an opportunity for a new cultural revolution. However, the development of digital technology offers us a new framework for carrying out human activity which, as such, bases its meaning on its anthropological dimension. Its social foundations are precisely the reason why editorial activity must have a distinctive nature, as it refers to the spread of ideas within a certain social context.

The ethical dimension of the profession is broadened within the context of reflecting on the role of media companies in the development of democratic political systems. But, in fact, ethical codes multiplied over the 20<sup>th</sup> century as they attempted to offer a guide to solving the ethical problems posed by public communication. Some authors claim that the production and spread of these codes is a reaction to the prevalence of technically efficient and economically profitable criteria. For others, this codification attempts to enhance the image of journalism and both to advocate and be exact on the ethical standards of professional practice (Aznar, 2005: 32-42).

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Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press; and Martín-Algarra, M. (2003), *Teoría de la comunicación: una propuesta*, Madrid: Tecnos.

It is now therefore possible to understand ethical codes as a *synthetic expression of an ethical tradition*<sup>2</sup>. They bring together the means of reasoning employed by the profession when tackling situations of moral conflict and have thus acquired a certain educational dimension, as they offer a basic guide to professional practice.

As part of an ethical tradition, the codes may be deeply rooted, which calls for communication ethics to be taught at three levels:

- (1) Considering its foundation, they reflect on the meaning of the journalistic function, the social good brought about by information or communication as a part of social ethics, and thus clearly refer to the virtue of justice.
- (2) In its directive aspect, they focus on the explanation and meaning of the operative criteria. Based on experience, communication ethics gathers and orders usual problems, and later formulates codes or indicates good professional practice.
- (3) At the level of reflection, professional conscience learns to strike a balance between the general norm and the particular situation. In this manner, training aims to respond correctly in different situations and according to the type of media considered. Case studies thus become a good tool of learning.

These levels of reasoning are interconnected with one other and cut across the whole curriculum. However, learning professional ethics requires a positive disposition towards the subject, which should develop aptitudes for complex reasoning to analyse the complexity of social life. This is the reason why the professional needs to further their knowledge of the basis of social conviviality: the foundations of social life, political activity, culture and the economy. In order to achieve it, university programmes should offer students in-depth training in the corresponding matters. In this respect, the idea of human beings, society and politics concerns the identity of journalism or every type of social communication, and could be developed upon at the school of communication as a foundation underpinning professional work.

In fact, developing the philosophical mind could be a means of exploring the foundations behind macro-ethical reasoning by way of the matters concerning journalism school programmes. According to Lenert, “beyond the concerns of micro ethics, however, there is an important but generally neglected level of analysis that falls in the domain of what I call macro ethics. This category of analysis applies to the collective social responsibility of journalism, as opposed to individual journalists, to our democratic institutions. A macro ethics perspective rigorously often stated ideal that journalism is an institution that is fully insulated from religious, state and corporate power, and looks to the linkage between journalism and democratic society” (2007).

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<sup>2</sup> With regard to the value of tradition in knowledge and ethics training, see Alasdair MacIntyre, A. (1990). *Three rival versions of moral enquiry: encyclopaedia, genealogy and tradition*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Journalism schools are exceptional settings in which to gain in-depth knowledge of the basics of society, ethics and politics, which could provide students with the first tools towards developing a more in-depth level of reasoning. This type of training conducts theoretical and practical teaching and is not the exclusive task of the ethics professor.

Students need to know the basis of social life, the foundations of human rights, the elements behind ethical reasoning, the origins of political life and the democratic system. At the same time, they must reflect upon the role of public communication in human society. Theoretical subjects could prove conducive to understanding those elements, and students could gain an insight into the epistemological limits of each type of knowledge.

Curricula matters and access to the profession are known to vary in different countries. Nevertheless, a general proposal could be put forward so as to improve ethics training at universities:

- (1) To underline the anthropological nature and the social responsibility stemming from the various forms of public communication in all subjects across the curriculum and particularly in subjects such as communication theory or journalism theory.
- (2) To introduce a number of humanistic subjects into the curriculum which examine the basis of ethics, social justice, politics, human rights and law in a theoretical (philosophical) manner.
- (3) To underline the role of social justice in public communication actions, placing an emphasis on knowledge of human rights content, and developing the practical ability to reason fairly, in a theoretical and practical manner.
- (4) To teach the different epistemological levels of knowledge, reasoning and communication through an appropriate subject such as epistemology (some academic programmes already include this subject) and through other theoretical and practical courses. It seeks to demonstrate what can be achieved and the limits of the different levels of knowledge.
- (5) To dedicate the initial lessons in some classical subjects on the academic programme, such as political communication, economic information, among others, to explaining the bases of understanding those disciplines. To clarify basic concepts at the outset of those subjects as a foundation that facilitates an understanding of the practical development of social facts before introducing any specific knowledge regarding communication strategies.
- (6) To promote coordinated work between all teaching staff, conveying a certain shared vision of journalistic work and public communication activities.
- (7) To develop practical projects and case studies as a powerful tool to heighten the capacity for critical reasoning. Theoretical agreement is achieved by means of completing projects and case studies. Through them, students could learn to reason without mixing epistemological levels, arguing in a coherent manner. Above all, different elements

must be coordinated in resolving cases, stretching beyond different dialectical positions and finding a way to truly coordinate different stances. By way of example, the Columbia Journalism School has developed the Knight Case Studies Initiative as a teaching tool since 2007.

Both theoretical and practical subjects generate a form of learning, through which students can evolve from theoretical knowledge to the production of a practical judgement and more in-depth decision-making. In fact, professional work standards must be interpreted and applied in a wide variety of specific situations or countries, in research processes and in obtaining, publishing and broadcasting information. The application of operative criteria is not always carried out mechanically; indeed it is often necessary to analyse and decide on the benefits included in professional action. The codes offer professional criteria, but they must be interpreted adequately. This interpretation should address the manner in which professional performance is consistent with establishing fairer and more equitable social relationships.

Learning communication ethics implies knowing how to analyse and decide on the good that the professional activity entails, and consequently to develop one's own moral character. Furthermore, as part of this moral character, it is important to develop a critical mind. However, it is not enough. In fact, learning media ethics reproduces the anthropological structure of education in ethics. It involves developing practical wisdom and includes the harmonious development of virtues<sup>3</sup> (MacIntyre, 1984). According to Quinn, “a strong moral framework requires that its possessors both understand and accept the inherently normative nature of journalism and gradually inculcate key journalistic moral virtues, moral values, and moral principles to positively develop their professional character” (2007: 168).

### **3. Reasoning based on social equity**

Reflecting upon ethical standards for professional action calls for the study of decisions made by professional journalists within the context of the social good brought about by the reality which is conveyed: informing, stating an opinion, deciding on an editorial line, etc. Insofar as the reality conveyed contributes to social good, it plays a role in creating and supporting just relations. As we are dealing with social ethics, the virtue that indicates the proper direction for the application of the best practice is justice.

However, the originality brought by technical innovation and its consequences on the formation of the contemporary mind cannot be confused with a transfer of the *responsibility* for what is communicated to the medium. The codification may work by simply regulating the use of tools, but it ignores the responsibility of the *individual who* communicates, or of the individual who receives the communication (Sádaba, 2001: 189). Beyond a specific ethic for each communication

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<sup>3</sup> With regard to virtue in ethics, see MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

medium, there is an ethical dimension, which is drawn from the nature of human communication actions. Therefore, communication must pay attention to technical and social changes and their cultural consequences, as these oblige the former to make prudent decisions on its appropriate implementation.

Projects and case studies place students in situations in which they must deal with problems and bear their ethical implications in mind. They can thereby learn how the nature of different supports alters the ethical dimension of the decision but does not replace the professional responsibility. They must think about how to develop their skills and the virtues they need in order to work with different tools in a responsible manner. The goal is to teach and consequently learn how to develop prudent reasoning about doing what is just.

Journalism ethics refers to justice as a regulatory virtue in social life, which protects those goods, which are proper to humankind and correctly establishes relations among individuals<sup>4</sup>. So, if public communication implies an act of mediation among people in order to be just, the person must be the focus of its interest. Thus the achievement of justice works by immediately attending to the particular dignity of the individual and the goods that belong to them.

Professional practice recognises the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1948) as a clear reference point for its activity. The principles it brings together are a starting point, a reference on the inherent goods of the individual, which must be protected by just social action. These human goods are necessary for the free development of the individual. This document is a great tool for the ethical training of students. They need to be highly familiar with its content, to work with it, and to learn the practical consequences for communication. The articles provide a common framework for the profession and raise professional awareness of human goods. References to *Human Rights* should be present in all theoretical or practical subjects.

The Declaration recognises freedom of expression and freedom of access to information as a fundamental right of the individual that guarantee the protection of other human goods. This characteristic by which public communication actions, as far as they mediate between people - citizens, towns, nations - are of assistance in the development of just social relations, explains some of the functions that have been assigned to journalism over time and allows for a definition of the conditions that legitimise, or are even demanded by certain journalistic actions such as controlling

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<sup>4</sup> The educational experience reveals the aptitude of students to understand Aristotle and Aquinas doctrines regarding justice as the giving of oneself. See Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, volume three II<sup>a</sup>-IIae qq. 58-62. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland, London: Christian Classics, P.O. Box 30, 1920).

The current debate on the nature of the relations of justice in democratic societies is complex. Some significant works on the subject are Jürgen Habermas & Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung: über Vernunft und Religion*, (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2006); Jürgen Habermas & John Rawls, *Debate sobre el liberalismo político* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1998); John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); John Rawls, *Political liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Richard Rorty, *Pragmatismo y política* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1998).

public power in practice, contributing to the development of fair competition among companies, reporting corruption, etc.

As information is guided from the perspective of doing justice, the information practice and the editorial line adopted by a news company may contribute positively to sustaining and consolidating the ethical sensitivity of a society. This inherent characteristic in the role played by communication companies within a social context places the activity of a news or communication company within a context of greater social responsibility. The responsibility of those who guide public opinion is an ethical responsibility, which also has consequences on the moral education of societies. It involves recognising meanings and goods associated with reality, which everyone should respect and promote as they contribute to making society more caring and just.

Within society, communication professionals are expected to behave in a manner that is close to a certain fulfilment of justice, which is related to the public expression of a type of knowledge; thus the absence of reaction when confronted by social dysfunction in the communication area shows a loss of moral sense in a society. Conversely, the proper practice of communication professions contributes to the consolidation of good social ethics. Thus, the service they offer to society has a certain educational value, as does the practice of jurisprudence, as it contributes to creating ethical social points of reference.

The ethical dimension of public communication should respect continuity in the principles of reflection and the guidelines for action. At the same time, it must respond appropriately to new communication or social situations: the new media, Internet, the speed of news distribution, cultural diversity, globalisation or different political systems. That is, the profession should respond to human society in a continuous flux. To do so, it is necessary to reflect and develop a comprehensive mind that grasps the differences regarding people, cultures and mentalities, and it tends to carefully moderate professional performance. University training must qualify professionals to act according to said diversity, and develop the sense of equity, that revises the norm and guides its practical application in a reflective and responsible manner.

Justice has a specific moral objective, which corresponds to a virtue that differs from the others, not in arbitrary way. The measure of virtue is not found in objective or subjective dispositions of the situation of the agent, so the disposition of the subject does not change the nature of the obligation of justice (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 7-9), which always refers to the good of the other. In fact, according to Quinn, “the role of justice as the governing agent-neutral virtue was given as one of the primary advantages virtue ethics offers a professional role morality” (2007: 181).

The general principles of justice, following a logical argument, direct us towards the specific principles that work in society. Aristotle places justice in a particular relationship with what belongs to community life (*Nicomachean Ethics*, V). The basis of injustice is that it opposes or despises the common good or the good of an individual. Thus the criteria for the selection



of information, the editorial line or public opinion accept a vision of the state of the res publica, which accentuates its proper or improper operation, and thus always implies a certain judgement of social reality, that is to say, on the way relations are established in the social framework. It is information that allows for participation in political life or contributes to the correction of any form of social discrimination.

Information establishes a certain judgement on reality, a rather discriminatory function implied in the communication of truth. Images of the guard dog, police, or the fourth power intuitively show some of journalism's inherent functions, but they do not yet clearly define its scope. Informing also shows the ethical dimension of reality. Moreover, information is frequently of significance due to its moral relevance: murder, robbery, hunger, unemployment, etc.

#### 4. Final thoughts

The journalist must develop the operative habit of judging those personal and social goods that are at stake, in such a way that their choice must be what is most just or appropriate to reality, that is, to social good, and therefore professional behaviour needs to enhance the philosophical mind. To achieve this objective:

- (1) University education should provide more in-depth initial training on the matter by way of theoretical and practical subjects.
- (2) Curricula should provide a first understanding of the basis of social life, politics, rights, religion, culture and the different epistemological levels of reasoning.
- (3) Through practical projects and case studies, students could learn to analyse the specific situation and heighten their sense of equity.
- (4) Experience shows that Aristotle and Aquinas' ideas on justice, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* are useful as a reference in classroom activities. Emphasis should be placed thereon and they should be applied to case analysis, translating theoretical principles into reality.
- (5) On the other hand, ethical action is closely linked to the growth of virtue. In order to foster that, ethical communication training needs to encourage students and professionals to develop their virtue and an appropriate sense of equity.

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