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The “Holy” Triad in Media Ethics: A Conceptual Model for Understanding Global Media Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Media ethics is an area of inquiry that has been of great concern among journalists and public relations professionals as well as scholars across the world. Empirical research on media ethics of comparative nature has increased, providing a descriptive account on the current situations across different countries. Yet, theoretical efforts to explain global media ethics are so far inexistent. The scope of this paper is to provide a conceptual model for explaining media ethics decision-making processes that takes into account personal, professional and environment values as main influencing forces. The proposed model suggests that besides considering personal factors, such as education, background, experience, gender, etc., and country specific factors, such as political, economic, socio-cultural conditions, one should first and foremost understand the degree to which personal, professional, and environment values influence one's judgment. This model is the first of its kind in providing an explanation of differences in global media ethics by considering the interconnectedness of different values at micro, meso, and macro levels.

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1. Introduction

Media ethics has long been at the center of attention for media scholars and public relations professionals. The level of ethical standards employed by both journalists and public relations professionals impacts how media relations activities are conducted and what types and quality of contents may shape public opinion. Media ethics are devolved on fundamental values of democracy, freedom, truth, honesty, objectivity, and privacy (Craig, 2010). A prominent line of research in media ethics concerns with the study of those factors and variables affecting fundamental media values and consequently the level of media ethics in a country. Early studies indicate that public relations is one of those key factors because public relations practitioners act as sources of information and even influencers of media agenda (e.g., Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Shin & Cameron 2003). Specifically, the approach used by public relations professionals to influence journalists' news decision making has implications for media ethics in terms of transparency and self-censorship (Tsetsura, 2011), and as such it deserves to be studied together with other factors that may influence journalists.

Previous studies on media ethics, which considered public relations influence, have, for instance, focused on the concept of transparency and interests' disclosure in media relations, for the reason that low levels of media ethics are often imputable to both journalists and public relations professionals' non-transparent practices. Such studies pointed out that ethics in media

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relations is a rather ambiguous and porous concept across the world (Harro-Loit & Saks, 2006; Tsetsura, 2008; Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011). Media non-transparency, or media opacity, is defined as “any form of payment for news coverage or any influence on an editor or journalist’s decision that is not clearly stated in the finished journalistic product” (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011, p.10). Despite the presence of professional code of ethics, researchers have identified forms of media non-transparent practices such as *envelope journalism* (Shafer, 1990), *cash for new coverage* (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003), or *paid news* (Tsetsura, 2015). This phenomenon is also referred to in different slang words around the world: *jinsa* in Ukraine (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009), *red envelope* in China (Tsetsura, 2015), and *pay-for play* in the USA (Tsetsura, 2008). The evidence of media non-transparent practices calls for investigation of what factors affect decision-making processes and overall media relations ethics and media and public relations credibility (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011).

This conceptual paper examines one specific aspect of media ethics that is decision-making processes. Early studies suggested the concept of value among several factors that affect human behavior, including news decision-making processes (Craig, 2010; Sylvie & Huang, 2008). Yet, the concept of value has only been given marginal relevance in public relations studies and has not been examined in depth. This conceptual paper ought to fill this gap by offering a global model for understanding media ethics (as applicable to both, public relations and journalism professionals) that is centered on the concept of value. The paper proposes and analyzes three main constitutive forces of media ethics: personal, professional, and environment values and illustrates how these three sets of values interact with one another and may influence the decision-making processes in media ethics. Reflections on the value of the proposed conceptual model for media scholars and public relations professionals are discussed and recommendations for future research are offered.

2. Media ethics’ decision-making processes

A great number of media ethics studies have dealt with investigating journalists’ practices and decision-making processes in the newsroom. Scholars investigated what makes such practices ethical (Anderson & Lowrey, 2007; Craig, 2010). To explain differences in journalists’ practices, researchers typically refer to personal factors, such as education, background, experience, gender, etc., of a journalist (Craig, 2010) or impute differences to the role of country-specific factors, such as specific political and socio-economic conditions (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015). Yet, another research stream in media ethics studies focused on studying which values ought to drive good journalism (Plaisance & Deppa, 2009). Scholarship about normative behavior is an important stream of research in media ethics, especially in sociological studies of journalism (Zelizer, 2004). However, there is another, sometimes under-regarded, focus, which is oriented toward individual conscience and is particularly effective for making sense of the internal perspective that journalists bring to ethical dilemmas in practice. Hove (2007) noticed that “in their normative language, media critics tend to stress the individual and personal dimensions of conscience, obligation, responsibility, and commitment” (p. 3).

The individualist approach to media ethics emphasizes journalists’ subjective decision-making processes and personal ethics as a fundamental basis for understanding how journalists perceive their jobs and perform their responsibilities (Craig, 2007). Although media ethics has to do with standards and practices, media are made up of individuals, and ethical concerns of mass media are ethics of individuals. Donsbach (2004) concluded that most journalists’ work is about perceptions, conclusions, and judgments. Thus, media ethics is connected with personal decision-making processes. Quinn (2007) emphasized the importance of internal view of media ethics that utilizes an internalized moral psychology for journalists based in virtue. Black and Barney (1985) insisted that individual professionals should transcend socially approved conventions codified by regulators and should become social catalysts in their own rights and values. Battistoli (2008) showed that the key to effective codes in journalism lies in a bottom-up approach built on individual, experience-based codes of ethics of journalists. What these studies seem to concur is that media ethics differs across countries not necessarily because journalists understand ethics in different ways, but because their professional decision-making processes are affected by their individual conscience, morality, and judgments. Yet, media ethics is also directly affected by the level of ethics of public relations professionals who can enact unethical media behaviors by offering something in return for news coverage. While most of previous work underlines the importance of having enforced journalists’ and public relations’ codes of conduct and codes of ethics to explain the level of media ethics, it is argued that other factors play a role in defining media ethics decision-making processes. The next section illustrates in more detail how media ethics is connected with values.

3. Values and media ethics

Numerous scholars have suggested that values provide the basis for the development of individual attitudes which lead to specific decision-making behaviors (Fritzsche, 1995). Therefore, to understand media ethics decision-making processes one must look at the values held by media organizations and public relations professionals. The concept of value is a multi-faceted one. In sociological terms, values are “concepts or beliefs that pertain to desirable end states or behaviors that transcend specific situations, and guide selection or evaluation of behaviors and events” (Schwartz, 1992; p. 4). Strictly speaking, values are normative guiding principles that tend to have objective meanings but subjective interpretations (Argandoña, 2003). Values are different from ethics as they do not distinguish actions according to *right versus wrong*. This distinction is important, because previous studies on media ethics tend to approach media ethics in journalistic and public relations practices according to the dichotomy of *right versus wrong*, which is treated as fundamental and is based on what Olson (2004) called an *intrinsicist view on ethics*. Intrinsicism is the notion that an activity holds a specific value solely on

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