

News Industry and Journalism Ethics

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Abstract: Journalists have always been the focus of an ethical debate. However, the codes by which journalists are evaluated emerged as a result of individual ethics. This understanding of ethics disregards the industrial conditions, and formal rules and procedures in which journalists produce and publish their news, and assumes that journalists are free. The individual responsibility assigned to the journalist does not make sense in this context. Furthermore, within the course of time ethical codes of journalism reduces journalist's sensitivity towards the profession's social context and connections to democracy. The individual journalist who is in the center of these ethical discussions is in fact far from the ethical responsibility he is assigned to. The main focus of the study is the political economic analysis of the rational organization of the journalism industry, and the relationship between the process of objective news writing and the existing codes of ethics.

Key Words: News Industry, Rational Production, News Writing Technique, Ethics, Democracy.

Journalists have always been the focus of an ethical debate. However, the codes by which journalists are evaluated emerged as a result of individual ethics. The ethical codes positioning journalists as the subject of ethics feed upon virtue ethics (Moressi, 2006, p. 30-60; Turkish Journalists Society (TGC), 2008; Jackson, 1998, p. 120-122). This understanding of ethics disregards the industrial conditions, and formal rules and procedures in which journalists produce and publish their news. The assumption here is journalists are free. Our study will try to analyze the journalism industry, the rational organization of the profession, the relationship between the process of objective news writing and the existing codes of ethics from a political economics perspective. The main focus of the study is the media-

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tion in objective journalism which forms the basis of the ethical codes of journalism and the rational organization of the journalism industry.

The profession of journalism is carried out in an industrial organization.⁴ Discussions on journalists' freedom and responsibility will not lead us anywhere without considering the conditions in which freedom and responsibility will be performed because industrial production conditions and bureaucratic organizations take away journalists' freedom and responsibility and carry it to a higher level via a chain of command. Bureaucratic organization of modernism requires individuals to solely function; they should not reflect on the meaning or the responsibility that the act will bear and leave it to their betters. (Bauman, 1997: 215; 2000: 158; 2001:339-340). Individuals' sense of responsibility within the system is fading away, and "I did what I was told to do" is becoming a more valid argument. For this reason, a journalist is quite removed from the ethical responsibility he is ascribed to. This growing distance initially results from the fact that the journey of the raw news starts only after it reaches the news organization and that the news reporter actually lacks control over the text. Another reason underlying the distance is the formal requirement that is imposed on journalists by editorial codes of objective news writing, an example of which could be observed in inverted pyramid texts. This separation between the journalist and ethical responsibility is rooted in the fact that the profession has turned into a rational production industry.

Inverted Pyramid and Rationalization

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a particular news making and writing technique that was developed in Europe and North America has become a dominant model of journalism world-wide. *Reuters* demands its reporters to write with "tried and tested inverted pyramid method" (Reuters, 2008: 26). The inverted pyramid method is also the emphasis of professional news texts in major journalism books and manuals, in the

⁴ The authors are aware of the post-industrial structure and properties of media today as they highlight and critique industrial organizations. However just as the post-Fordism era containing forms of Fordism and pre-Fordism (Hall, Jacques, 1995:16-17), the post-industrial era of media contains industrial and pre-industrial forms. The profession of journalism today can be performed without an industrial organization thanks to the technological advances such as the internet and social media. Despite these facilities, activities that are accepted as journalism are still in need of a corporate identity. "Blog author should abide by the principles of the institution and refrain from explaining personal opinions that may not be accepted in the newspaper or on television and radio" (Media Association, 2011:34). This code of ethics shows that a journalist working for an institution cannot avoid the hierarchical organization of the institution regardless of the liberating tools he possesses.

general understanding in academia and in various educational seminars in Turkey, too (Girgin, 2002; Tokgoz, 2006; Yuksel, 2005, Anatolia News Agency, 2008; Bell, 1991).

“Journalism...is an industrial art. The inverted pyramid, the 5 W’s lead, and associated techniques are as much a product of industrialization as tin cans.” (Carey, 1974: 246). “Every newspaper reporter should answer the questions , What? Who? Where? When? Why? and should do it in rthe first paragraph as nearly as possible. This i.s the fi.rst and greatest commandment in rthe maner of journalistic style and the penalty for breaking it is the wastebasket and swift oblivion.” (Manoff and Schudson, 1986: 3).

Max Weber’s concept of rationalization which he used in many areas ranging from economics to law, from business to religious ethics has a variety of meanings, such as a growing emphasis on specialized knowledge as a result of depersonalized relationships, developments in measurement techniques, and increasing control over natural and social phenomena (Berry, 1994).

Weber makes a distinction between formal and material rationality. In the case of formal rationality, action relies on a purpose-based rational calculation through most feasible methods. Material rationality is considered with reference to a particular value orientation (Berry, 1994). Weber’s definitions of formal and material rationality, value and purpose-based rational action are useful to be able to understand how the industrial and commercial structure of journalism coexist with the public interest (at least on the surface) that the profession is supposed to look after. If we apply this theoretical framework to newspaper management, we can observe that coexistence of formal and material rationality is not a smooth one. One of the most important sources of legitimacy for newspapers has been the public’s right to access to news (Berry, 1994). This represents journalism’s material rational commitment, and when applied could be a motivating factor to strengthen democracy. However, these kinds of material rational approaches have traditionally been compromised by financial and institutional imperatives, or have been sacrificed to them in varying degrees (Berry, 1994). The most affected product by this formality is the news itself, written in an inverted pyramid format. Thus, inverted pyramid news has become a technique that focuses on the format of transferring knowledge rather than the knowledge itself. “Technique disables the minds and the use of all sorts of ethical, aesthetic, or political responsibilities by trapping them into fragmented contexts” (Moressi, 56). What is being presented as

an objective standard, in fact, is a culmination of processes in the selection of news. As Lippmann suggests, “Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed,-in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have” (Lule, 1989: 31).

Inverted Pyramid and Loss of Reporter’s Control over Text

Journalism is no longer a duty of idealistic purposes, it is a career field. (Talu, 1999: 18-20). To be able to move up in this career, a specified job has to be carried out in a prescribed way (Talu, 1999: 18-20). Production patterns create institutionalized routines. Publishing a daily newspaper imposes a strict regime; editors have to fill the vacuum of other news. Daily routine is more challenging, because there are financial and labor constraints (Sigal, 1986: 16). The inverted pyramid structure of news, which has become a part of our daily routine, excludes individuality and subjectivity. It is a technique that strategically uses this format in order to reach the positivist principle of objectivity. Subjectivity limits the target audience, thus circulation, whereas objectivity expands boundaries and the market share (Kunelius, 1994: 264).

Positivism claimed to leave out biases in natural sciences as well as social sciences, and to separate facts from value judgments, and ideology from science. The inverted pyramid news writing technique has the same assertion to rid journalists of their prejudices and present the facts to the reader in a non-invasive and non-manipulative way. However, inverted pyramid model is the anti-structure of the asserted objectivity and non-invasion because this technique makes it easier to tinker with the news, allowing many industrial interventions and alienating the journalist from the report.

Concretization of Code of Objectivity to Hide Mediation

The inverted pyramid news format provides great speed and efficiency in daily news production automation. In this respect, contrary to the general assumption, objective news is necessary for industry, rather than democracy. Fresh news, the lead sentence and the compact text are the terms that form the basis of inverted pyramid news, and they tend to be constantly repeated in the profession and vocational training. These concepts tell a lot about the values of news and of the reporters. Budgets require the news fit into the allotted time in broadcasting and the physical space of the

page in publishing (Bell, 1995: 306; Schudson, 1978, 1986). Selection and screening of the news items are founded in commercial realism: the logic of writing such news is shaped according to how commercial semantics of events are perceived.

This criticism suggests that frequently repeated positivism is in fact used in order to create a commercial allure by journalists. Deciding what is important and what is not means fragmenting, dividing, eliminating and re-arranging what is essentially indivisible. But this implicit effort does not prevent journalists from calling fragmented pieces of facts as facts. Journalists treat their presentations of event-objects as things that have been discovered, and therefore deserve to be presented (Hasty, 2006: 79).

News by its very nature is a perishable commodity and has a limited shelf life. The importance of the time element usually pushes other items to the background. Time, keeps journalistic endeavor under its domination in a way similar to some other professions, such as restaurant management where the product has to be ready within the time prescribed or it will expire and cannot be used (Schlesinger, 1987: 83-105).

How did this synchronicity that reduces the distance between the event and its story, almost drifting towards a live, real-time narrative emerge? According to Carey (1986), penny press of the 1830s, took the time concept from commerce and business. Thus, identification of success in terms of journalism has shifted from being the best to being the first (Bell, 1995: 325).

Technology, manufacturing practices and industrial forces have an enormous impact on editorial processes. In this respect, inverted pyramid is like Lego that fits into the manufacturing patterns. News is not configured in a way that boils down to a conclusion like other traditional texts and does not show an Aristotelian sense of sequence from a beginning to an end. This non-Aristotelian textuality can be explained by the notion of “radical editability” (White, 1998: 180).

Author(s) of the News, Institutionalized Routines and Loss of Liability

The general belief is that news is written by one single author (Pietila, 1992: 45). However, news stories pass through different authors in the manufacturing process. Reporters, editors, page secretaries, page editors, editorial directors if necessary, and even editors in-chief are among the aut-

hors (Cemal, 2008:17). A news story is essentially a summary. Who makes these summaries, additions, reductions and according to what criteria? The answer lies in the value of the news or the newspaper's publication policy. In the face of routines and procedures, the individual journalist loses his or her control over and responsibility for the news story. Thus, journalists are distanced down the chain of command from the news story and its democratic functions such as public right to know, public interest and public duty that will also provide the basis for the legal and social legitimacy of the text. The distinction scientific knowledge makes between subjectivity and objectivity, keeping facts clear off personal opinions and considerations, the concept of knowledge independent of people, identification of journalism ethics with scientific ethics a result of the defeat of subjectivity and ethical codes of journalism are interrelated concepts. Media institutions rarely exist without any news, and news cannot exist without media. The institution provides the mechanism for distribution on the one hand, provides a guarantee for reliability and competence on the other (McQuail, 2005: 375). The mediation effect of humane and technological situations is often touched upon in the journalism industry and political economy studies. "Another feature of mediating is tailoring the news for media" (Rigel, 2000: 180).

Journalism Ethics Codes and Technical Sovereignty of Industrial Structure: Hero Journalists

The news is manufactured by a team organized as part of an industrial production. It does not seem likely for journalists in this structure to act ethically alone. Moressi's quote from Saxer is very explanatory in that respect: "One of the biggest shortcomings in the ongoing ethical debate over journalism is ethical journalism is regarded mostly as a personal moral problem" (Moressi, 2006:30-31).

According to Karmasin, individual responsibility makes sense only if the individual is free (Moressi, 2006:32-33). In this case, disregarding the conditions of the media system and industrial structure is converted into a mechanism that justifies the structure (Moressi, 2006:32-33).

Therefore, ethical codes of journalism which assign responsibility to the individual journalist do not offer any solutions for functional rationality. There are two reasons for this lack of solution: The first reason is journalists are being distanced from their products and their responsibilities within the industrial production process. The second is that the responsibility

requires freedom which journalists lack in this structure. The underlying foundations of the journalism profession are democracy and connection with the public. These concepts tell us why it is necessary to think of journalism in a broader social ethical perspective.

Journalism, Democracy, the Myth of Objectivity and the Break from Principle of Publicity

Democracy cannot be separated from communication and citizen participation in public events (Encabo, 1997: 283). Journalism plays a key role here. Carey (2007) and de Tocqueville (Cangöz, 2003: 101) express that there is no democracy without journalism, and vice versa. Dealing with the concept of democracy along with the idea of publicity will concretize the relationship between journalism and democracy. The modern conception of public sphere is the most important reason for the emergence of press as a public tool. Again, the basis of the legal privileges of media lie in the public sphere as Habermas (2009) idealized in bourgeois public sphere. The origins of the relationship between the press and modern democracy could be seen in the public sphere and the struggle against public power. In the 19th century, class originated press served with success (Curran and Seaton 1991: 19), but industrialization of the press and the shift towards mass media separated the media from a particular group of readers, a community, a sub-culture or a party. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the radical press largely collapsed, gathered in the hands of a few incorporations and finally the media has taken its place. These mergers and concentrations are one of the significant effects on the new form of journalism textuality.

Result

Understanding of individual ethics reduces the public origins of journalism and its struggle with public power to the hero journalist myth. Its failure to solve the problems of the modern era has led to a continuous search for new ethical codes. Keeping the individual journalist responsible is actually concealing the real problem within a system that grinds individualism down.

There are two ways that can be recommended here, and one of them is the democratization of the structures where journalists produce news. The second way is developing a much broader perspective of ethical understanding. In both cases, discussion boils down to democracy.

Today's understanding of a small number of virtuous hero journalists is a myth passing down from generation to generation. Codes of journalism ethics and mystification created by stories of hero journalists are transforming the relationship between journalism, democracy and public culture. In that respect, this could be compared to capitalism transforming the nature and meaning of public life through commodity fetishism. The attention of the consumer citizen who gets the news as a finished product will be directed to the news itself, not the circumstances the news is made. In this case, the objective news, presented to the public with the latest technology will be legitimized through journalistic ethics and will transform democracy. News industry and media are still defined as a single tool for citizen participation in political debate and decision-making. Thus, citizens who want to live in a democratic society should do nothing but wait for the virtuous heroes of journalism to show up and save the journalism profession until the concepts of common good and public interest are repaired or re-defined. While waiting, we should keep in mind that the only virtuous hero to survive in this system is Superman, the passive but moral journalist who does not pose a threat to the intricate grids of politics and the media.

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