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MEDIA ETHICS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract: Ethical problems are too common in contemporary society. Media is just one of the fields where ethics needs to be reconsidered. The authors present ethical models for making ethical decisions. Some of them belong to traditional theories as Aristotelian Golden Rule or Utilitarianism but some of them are new, such as integrated model for decision making. Some theorists in the field of business ethics show that personal ethics is the most important for ethical behavior. This shows that ethical education and morality play the main role in applied ethics, too. In this paper, we present the results of two interviews. The first one is made with the students of journalism on Faculty of Philosophy in Serbia, Niš and the second is made with media workers in six on-line medias in Niš.

Keywords: ethical theories, models/ethical decision/ethical behavior/ethical education/ ethical sensitivity

464

1. Introduction

Ethical problems in the media are the type of problems which those who are employed in the media share with their audience. The concern which exists in some portion of those employed in the media regarding these questions is completely justified. The consequences of unethical journalism are serious: spreading misinformation, production and expansion of stereotypes, undermining democracy, the rule of the powerful, etc. The current media sphere can freely be labelled as the "space of hopelessness" if we take into consideration the misinformation which circulates on the Internet, social networks, fake portals, etc.

What are the reasons for the moral downfall of journalists and media workers? Do the journalists perceive the role of ethics in journalism as a profession? Do the students of journalism see the significance of this field for the freedom of the press? With the aim of finding answers to these questions, two surveys were conducted among the students of journalism and communicology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, and among the employees in the six online media portals, among the editors and journalists of those media, to be more precise.

The moral agents (media workers) are faced with different moral problems in their line of work. The theoretician Day believes that this problem can be recognised only if we are familiar with ethics. In that sense, learning ethics is necessary, especially if we expect from workers to make fewer deliberate mistakes when they perform their professional duties.

In the paper, we put forward models and ethical theories which, according to the theoreticians, can be useful for journalists in making the right decisions. In addition, we examine which of those models is the best. In the second part of the paper, we present the results of the surveys and summarise the conclusions.

2. Models of Making Moral Decisions

The process of making moral decisions is a systematic approach to making ethical decisions (Day, 2004). The choice between the right and the wrong way of acting is not difficult to make, and it can happen that even what we consider to be a bad choice brings something good. The real "tough choices", as they are called by Rushworth Kidder (2006), occur when we choose between two just actions. And that is the difference between moral dilemmas and moral challenges. In this part of the paper we will present three models of making decisions which are grounded on the application of certain ethical theories. First of all, we will show the model of making ethical decisions which is known as the DAO for-

mula. The DAO model consists of three steps: 1 – defining the situation; 2 – the analysis of the situation by using moral theories, and 3 – decision (Day, 2004). The defining of a situation implies the setting of the ethical question, the facts are listed, and the values and the principles are examined. It is not always easy to find the right values, sometimes it requires a lot of thinking. The second step implies the application of ethical theories and the selection of the best one, and, in the end, there is the act of making a decision.

The second model is Bok's model. "It is based on two premises: that we must have empathy for the people involved in ethical decisions and that maintaining social trust is a fundamental goal"(Patterson, Willkins, 1996). It consists of three steps. The first step is to ask ourselves about the "rightness" of an action. The second one implies searching for professional advice for alternative activities (advice from someone we trust; they can also be philosophers or other experts). The third step, if possible, implies conducting a discussion with the parties involved in the dispute.

The next model that has been selected is known as the integrative model (W. Edward Stead, Dan L. Vorel and Jean Garner Stead, 2001). This model is based on the idea that human behaviour is centred on the interaction between an individual and the situation, that is, that individual and situational elements affect the behaviour of an individual. Undoubtedly, the models of human behaviour are influenced by culture, family, and the customs of one's homeland, etc. Actually, the ethical behaviour of employees within an organisation is affected by many variables. The behaviour of employees is affected by: the ethics of management and the behaviour of management. Mark Pastin (2001) suggests that ethics should be observed as an integral force in the management. Although the thought of ethics often provokes disgust in employees, practice shows that making ethical decisions brings a lot of good to organisations and their employees. According to Pastin, ethical reasoning encourages questioning of one's own decisions, one's opinion about others, and the goals of the organisation.

2.1. Tough Choices and Solving Dilemmas by applying ethical theories

Rushworth Kidder believes that "tough choices" can be made, when we choose between the two right ones, by using the three principles: the opinion based on the aim, the opinion based on the regulation and the opinion based on care (Kidder, 2006). The first principle is based on utilitarianism, the second on deontology and the last on Judeo|-Christian ethics. Besides these theories, the theories of virtues and egalitarianism can also be helpful.

466

Greek theories on ethics are also called the ethics of virtues. In Ancient Greece, great attention was paid to the development of the right personality. Therefore, Aristotle suggested the Golden Mean rule as the principle according to which one could choose the best decisions. In the media, this theory can be applied when it comes to the content which is not suitable for every audience, such as pornography, and even reality programmes.

Besides the Golden Mean there is also a golden rule, which consists of the following maxim: Do not do to others, what you would not want them to do to you (Kung Fu-Ce); Do not hurt others with that which hurts yourself (Buddha); Everything you want others to be doing to you, you be doing to them (Jesus Christ). These three rules of acting, which are present in different religions, are very similar and they have a common message: respect others and do good. In this way, a journalist should respect the truth, someone else's private space and dignity.

The deontological principle (Immanuel Kant) puts duty in front of people as an important virtue. Acting out of duty is not acting out of sympathy. Also, acting out of duty is also not acting out of duties such as keeping somebody alive, doing charity, etc. It does not depend on the objective intention which the acting of this kind has within itself, and on the subject's motives, as well.

Contrary to this, the utilitarian principle states: a certain act should be given priority in relation to some of the alternatives according to the degree of the increase of success which is achieved by it, in comparison to the degree of the increase which would be achieved by alternative acts. Therefore, a certain act is good in relation to the degree it increases social gain. However, this ethics allows for a moral agent to use dishonourable means if it leads to a good outcome. Another theory which is often used by journalists is egalitarianism (John Rawls, 1998). This theory states that all individuals should be treated equally when it comes to their rights and possibilities. Rolls suggests that individuals who care about their personal interest should enter a social contract in order to reduce the damage done to individuals. The metaphor "veil of ignorance" encourages the development of an ethical system which is based on equality according to what individuals deserve and not according to special privileges.

3. Survey with students on journalist and applied ethics

The survey on journalist and applied ethics included a research corpus of 60 students from the Department of Communicology and Journalism, at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Niš including thirty-five (35) students

from the second and third year of Bachelor Academic Studies of Communicology and twenty-five (25) students from the second year of Bachelor Academic Studies of Journalism, who have attended the subject called Media ethics. As far as gender is considered, 60% of the respondents are female and 40% are male. The survey was conducted during the period of two weeks.

We asked a test question on the difference between moral and ethics. The survey showed that most of the students can differentiate between moral and ethics, since 77% of them answered that they agree (Table 1).

Do you agree that there is a difference between moral and ethics?	I completely agree	I agree	I don't have an opinion	I don't agree	I completely disagree
	18.3%	76.7%	5%	0%	0%

(Table 1)

The following few questions can be an indicator of how useful theoretical knowledge is. When answering the question: Does ethical conduct lead to a good outcome? Majority of the students (67%) answered depending on the situation. The minority of students (30%) answered mostly yes (table 2).

Ethical conduct always leads to a good outcome:	Mostly yes	Depending on the situation	I am not sure	Mostly not	Other
	30%	67%	1.5%	1.5%	0%

(Table 2)

On the question: Are your private decisions and behavior based on the influence of a role model (family member, friend, public person)? more than a half of the respondents, 32 students (53.3%), answered depending on the situation. On the other hand, 30% of respondents answered mostly not. Five respondents (8.3%) answered that they are not sure and five respondents said that it is mostly true that their moral decision depend on the role model (table 3).

468

Are your private decisions and behavior based on the influence of a role model, family member, friend, public person)?	Mostly yes	Depending on the situation	I am not sure	Mostly not	Other
	8.3%	53.3%	8.3%	30%	0%

(Table 3)

Certain theorists claim that thinking about ethical problems and studying ethics can have a positive influence on justified decision making. Therefore, we included the following hypothesis- Studying ethics at university helped me solve moral dilemmas in my private life. The most common answer to this claim was mostly not (36.7%). Then follows the answer -I am not sure (23.3%), which showed that university subjects have less influence when it comes to ethical dilemmas than the role model of the respondent (table 4).

Studying ethics at university helped me solve moral dilemmas in my private life:	Mostly yes	Depending on the situation	I am not sure	Mostly not	Other
	18.3%	21.7%	23.3%	36.7%	0%

(Table 4)

Given the omnipresence of media and social media in lives of young people, we included the following hypothesis: The concept of ethical behavior is significantly modified under the influence of modern media and social networks. Somewhat more than half of the respondents (53%) agreed with the claim that the concept of ethical behavior is significantly modified under the influence of modern media and social networks, while 37% completely agreed with this claim (table 5).

469

The concept of ethical behavior is significantly modified under the influence of modern media and social networks::	I completely agree	I agree	I don't have an opinion	I don't agree	I completely disagree
	36.7%	33.3%	6.7%	3.3%	0%

(Table 5)

The claim by which we examined the attitude of the subjects on whether the perception of ethical behavior depends on cultural background of an individual, showed that more than half of the students (55%) agreed with this attitude, 25% completely agreed, while 18% answered that they don't have an opinion (table 6). In classes, students generally think that ethics is conditioned by the culture of an individual (table 6).

The concept of ethical behavior depends on cultural background of an individual:	I completely agree	I agree	I don't have an opinion	I disagree	I mostly disagree
	25%	55%	18.3%	1.7%	0%

(Table 6)

The very last question was how often the word ethics appears in media and media discourse. The most common answer (43%) was that they rarely hear this word, while 30% of students circled the answer several times a month (table 7).

How often do you come across with the word and concept ethics in media (do you hear this word in media or can you read it in media):	Almost every day	More times a week	More times a month	Rarely	Almost never
	6.7%	10%	30%	43.3 %	10%

(Table 7)

470

4. The survey with editors in chief from online media from the South of Serbia

The survey was conducted on the sample of 6 respondents – 6 editors in chief from 6 online media from the South of Serbia during April 2019. Since they are the most numerous type of local, and regional media with daily informative content, online media were chosen for this analysis. Among the respondents, only 33.3% of them are journalists by education, and 66.7% studied ethics at university.

The final decision on which content is going to be publicized and in which way is made by the media's editor in chief, or at least that is how it is supposed to be. Editors whose attitudes and opinions are analyzed in this research mostly agree that they are the ones who take a special care about the journalist ethics. However, two of the editors in chief said that there isn't any person who deals with the issue of ethical questions, but that that decisions are made collectively.

All the editors in chief agree that trainings on journalist ethics are important, and add that their journalists attend them whenever there is an opportunity for that, 2 or more times a year.

Ethical dilemmas are one of the components of every profession. When questioned about the way of solving ethical questions, editors in chief listed different ways of solving the dilemmas in practice: by talking with the editor or within the editorial board, by consulting the Codex of Journalists of Serbia or by contacting the members of the Press Council for counseling, if necessary. The members of the Press Council were mentioned by the two editors in chief, one of which emphasized to have their own consultant, while three media do not consult any experts outside the editorial board, but solve their dilemmas inside their media house.

5 out of 6 editors claims that their media does not have any specially developed internal mechanisms which help the employees when it comes to the ethical judgement, while one media has a special internal codex which defines the behavior in the situations which journalists encounter on daily basis.

The subjects which editors in chief notice to usually cause ethical dilemmas are society, politics, chronicle, social justice and the minority rights. One of the editors does not single out any of the subjects as the most frequent, while one of them notices that the smallest number of dilemmas appear in the field of culture.

83.3% respondents answered that their decisions are conditioned by the situation, as well as that ethical conduct leads to a good outcome. 100% of them

471

answered that their ethical decisions are not influenced by the superiors, as well as that the competition does not influence their ethical judgement.

5. The survey with the journalists of online media in the South Serbia

The survey was conducted on a sample of 15 journalists, 60% of whom are journalists by education, and 80% of them studied ethics at university.

73.3% of them claim that their ethical judgement is conditioned by the situation, which is less than the editors in chief (83.3%).

Just as with the editors in chief, 100% of the surveyed journalists believe that acting ethically leads to the right, or correct outcome. This is an indication of the necessity of ethical conduct in the journalist profession in order to maintain not only professional level but responsibility to the public as well.

However, although they are aware of the importance of the ethical conduct, 20% of journalists admits that their superiors influence the ethics of their decision making, while 6.5% claim that their competitors are the ones who influence it.

6. Conclusion

Moral challenges are based on the choice between right and wrong. We recognize wrong if someone breaks the law, if we move further away from the truth and the deviations of moral power (Kidder, 2005: 45-47). Models of making moral decisions could help professionals to choose the right way. We may conclude that integrative model of making moral decision is accepted in practice among media professionals.

In the conclusion we summarize some of the most important results in this field of research. First of all, the survey with students on journalist and applied ethics shows that private decisions and behavior of students surveyed mostly depends on the situation (53.3%) and it is based on the influence of a role model (family member, friend, public person). Studying ethics at university does not help students to solve moral dilemmas in their private life (36.7%) and (23.3%) said that they are not sure.

The survey among editors in chief shows that they recognize the importance of ethical education. In solving ethical questions, editors in chief listed different ways of solving the dilemmas in practice: by talking to the editor or within the editorial board, by consulting the Codex of Journalists of Serbia or by contacting the members of the Press Council for counseling, if necessary.

The same survey was conducted with the journalists from the media where editors in chief are employed, which enables the comparative analysis of the opinions and attitudes of the editors on ethical questions. 73.3% of journalists claim that their ethical judgement is conditioned by the situation, which is less than the editors in chief (83.3%). This information suggests that journalists perceive that in the performance of their professional duties it is necessary to assess various factors influencing their reasoning, so that by their reporting or non-reporting they wouldn't act irresponsibly and cause damage to those who are being reported about or to the public. 20% of journalists admits that their superiors influence the ethics of their decision making, while 6.5% claim that their competitors are the ones who influence it. This information is indicative and it opens ideas for further research, having in mind that editors in chief (100%) claim that neither their superiors, nor the competition influence their ethical judgements in any way. This indicates the existence of greater freedom when it comes to solving ethical dilemmas individually with professionals in their media houses who have got a higher rank in the employees' hierarchy.

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