Waiting for a New St. Benedict: Alasdair MacIntyre and the Theory and Practice of Journalism

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☐ *Alasdair MacIntyre, author of* After Virtue, *combined moral philosophy, sociology, and history in a way that could lead scholarship in journalism and mass communication along interesting new paths. His definition of a social practice may be especially helpful by providing a model of what can happen when journalists working in close knit professional communities strive to meet standards of excellence and his articulation of the creative connection between social practice past and present offers new possibilities for writing journalism history.* After Virtue *and other works by MacIntyre neither make reference to journalism nor provide moral decision making schema easily exportable to professional life, yet his account of the concept and role of the virtues in western society may provide a rich analytical resource for mass media scholars. This article attempts to illustrate how.*

What if the writings of a moral philosopher not widely known among journalism educators had the potential to:

1. Sharpen the appreciation of how standards of excellence in journalism are or can be established, maintained, and raised?
2. Create a richer context for the practice of media criticism?
3. Furnish an alternative perspective on the history of journalism so as to broaden its function and appeal?
4. Challenge media ethicists to rethink the way many of them conceive and practice applied ethics?

   This article explores such potential in the work of moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and critically evaluates his insights as they might apply to the theory and practice of journalism.

   MacIntyre's (1981) book, *After Virtue,* deeply impressed and disturbed the philosophic and literary world of North America. Political theorist Benjamin M. Barber (1982) called it "a powerful and revealing indictment of modernity" (p. 30). Sociologist Robert N. Bellah (1982) described it as "one of the most important books of the decade" (p. 661). Philosopher J. M. Cameron (1981) noted, "It is something to have a book, devoted to certain quite central technical philosophical questions, which is likely to produce so passionate a response" (p. 48). The passion ranged from sociologist Murray Wax's (1982) encomium— "clear, marvelously erudite, and challenging" (p. 348)—to political scientist George Kateb's (1982) description of *After Virtue* as "not only a book of anger but of disgust, disaffection, and worse" (p. 433).

Complex Virtues Thesis

   In *After Virtue* and its sequel, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (MacIntyre, 1986), a complex thesis about the role of the virtues in human life is developed. MacIntyre argued that the forms of practical rationality that guide ethical decision making are intimately linked to the various moral traditions from which they spring. In scholarly and sometimes recondite terms, MacIntyre traced what he believes to be the decline, not only of the capacity for moral discourse, but of the sense of human community that supports morality. A neo-Aristotelian, MacIntyre concluded *After Virtue* with a lament that the barbarians are not just beyond the gates but "have already been governing us for quite some time" (p. 263). His chief recommendation is "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new Dark Ages which are already upon us" (p. 263). That so many of us, in his view, are unaware of the desperateness of our state "constitutes part of the predicament," he said, adding: "We are waiting not for a Godot but for another, doubtless very different, St. Benedict" (p. 263).

   This article does not focus at any length on MacIntyre's gloomy conclusion or assess in any detail the adequacy of his brief prescription. Nor, as an exploratory article, does it formally test hypotheses. Rather, it attempts, wherever possible, to assess the implications of MacIntyre's ideas for journalism and, to some extent, for journalism education. In doing so, the article first looks at how MacIntyre's blend of sociology and moral philosophy can be used to provide a different perspective on the setting of standards of excellence in journalism. Second, MacIntyre's particular understanding of standards of excellence

and his definition of a social practice is sifted for new perspectives on media criticism. Third, his unique emphasis on the importance of the past is examined for what it implies as the teaching and appreciation of journalism history. Finally, a brief critical evaluation is made, from the perspective of journalism ethics, of his provocative 1984 article, "Does Applied Ethics Rest on a Mistake?" (MacIntyre, 1984).

With the possible exception of cultural studies, mass communication research is not known for making extensive use simultaneously of social science concepts and the humanities. MacIntyre's definition and development of a social practice idea provides a promising new model for such eclectic scholarship. He defined a *social practice* as a complex and cooperative human activity that seeks to advance certain "goods," or defined ends. A practice achieves such goods, MacIntyre said, when it meets standards of excellence that are appropriate to the practice and partially define the practice. To a journalist, it is good to tell the whole story, not just part of it. Telling the whole story means different things in different reportorial contexts (Lukas, 1985; Mollenhoff, 1981; Weinberg, 1989).

Other goods that define journalism include reporting that serves the public interest; gathering, writing, and editing the news with fairness; choosing clear, vivid, and precise prose; keeping the reader squarely in mind; and conducting journalism in a way that preserves its First Amendment rights to free expression. Examples that abound to show these are, in fact, *journalistic goods* respected within the craft or profession.

These internal goods, according to MacIntyre, tend to be indivisible. To produce them is not to create a situation in which the more one has the less someone else has. Achieving internal goods benefits the entire practice. By contrast, external goods tend to be divisible. The more one person has in any specific context, the more likely others may have less. External goods include wealth, fame, prestige, and position. True, they can be produced as a result of achieving internal goods, but the pursuit of more and more external goods—salary, celebrity, status, power—can corrupt practices. Again, by contrast, the pursuit of internal goods have the opposite effect—enhancing practices.

Excellence Evaluated, Extended

MacIntyre's (1981) argument is that the pursuit of standards of excellence within a practice accounts substantially for the achievement of goods. More important, such pursuit sets in motion a dynamic by which the capacity to achieve excellence can be elevated and extended. As a result, new concepts of the goods and ends involved in a practice emerge (pp. 188–190.)

Central to MacIntyre's argument is that goods within a practice cannot be advanced without the exercise of courage, justice, and honesty. These virtues are not mere attitudes that ward off sundry vices; nor are virtues mere therapeutic agents that keep our passions under control. Rather, they are acquired human traits of which the exercise contributes materially to the development and extension of practices. If MacIntyre's assessment is correct, one would hypothesize that the dynamic just described would be at work in the achievement of the particular goods of journalism just enumerated.

Take the journalistic good just defined as telling the whole story. A case study in point is the evolution of the use of survey research techniques. A former journalism professor at the University of Iowa, George Gallup, pioneered the accurate use of public opinion polls for use in media in the 1930s and 1940s (Meyer, 1979, p. 144). Newspapers used polls syndicated by Gallup, Elmo Roper, and others but seldom tried to conduct their own in those early years. It was Philip Meyer of the Knight Newspapers who bucked the traditional resistance of journalists to quantitative methods. He mastered them during his Nieman Fellowship year at Harvard University in 1966–67 and put them immediately to use (Williams, 1978, p. 130).

Survey Research in Special Study

In July 1967, Meyer directed a special study for the Detroit Urban League which was published shortly after the summer riots of that year. Rather than merely providing snapshot descriptions like the Gallup and Roper polls, the Detroit poll sought to analyze as well as describe. The results contradicted the then conventional wisdom that rioters were usually uneducated riffraff and chiefly migrants from the south. Instead, they were more educated and more frequently employed than average inner-city Detroit Blacks and had aspirations for upward mobility (Williams, 1978, p. 130). The survey's findings figured prominently in the 1968 Report of the Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (*National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1968, pp. 129–134, 172, 302).

A desire to be truthful rather than just superficially accurate motivated Meyer and his Detroit colleagues (Hage, Dennis, Ismach, & Hartgen, 1983, pp. 44–45). A commitment to justice for citizens regardless of race was a news value that suffused the entire reporting enterprise. And it took courage to pursue the use of survey research in a newsroom not accustomed to it (Hage et al., 1983, pp. 44–45).

But the mere presence of the major virtues alone would not have been enough to illustrate fully the MacIntyre model of the standards of excellence dynamics. One must show that the conceptions of the goods

and ends involved in the particular type of reporting were systematically extended. In fact, that is what has happened as investigative journalism has increasingly mastered the use of the computer pioneered by Meyer.

Meyer's book, *Precision Journalism,* provided a detailed explanation of how to use survey research and related computer applications. Many practitioners adopted these techniques of survey research (Hage et al., 1983, pp. 44–45). They especially made use of the computer's power to organize information. Thus, in 1972, Donald Barlett and Jim Steele of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* combined documents research with computer analysis. They analyzed more than 1,000 violent crimes, almost all of those prosecuted in the city during a 1-year period. They studied the times and locations of crime, the officers and victims, the demographics and records of the accused, and the disposition of the cases. Among the conclusions reached were that (a) Blacks and Whites were treated differently, (b) justice is slow, (c) the reputations of some judges were undeserved, (d) Republican judges imposed longer sentences than Democratic judges, and (e) judges who were former assistant district attorneys were tougher in sentencing.

Investigative reporter Dick Krantz, in summarizing the significance of the Barlett and Steele series on Philadelphia criminal courts, provided an assessment that squares neatly with MacIntyre's description of the fruits of a social practice that pursues standards of excellence. In short, the conception of the good of telling the whole story had been refined and systematically extended. Krantz wrote:

> It was like the first picture of earth taken from a satellite. Or, to put it another way, for the first time you could see the forest of the court system, instead of merely looking at the trees . . . . This comprehensive picture of the courts was unprecedented and powerful. (Ullmann & Honeyman, 1983, p. 367)

For their work, the two reporters won the Sidney Hillman Foundation, the American Bar Association, and the American Newspaper Guild Heywood Broun awards for investigative reporting. Other newspapers are using the techniques pioneered by Meyer, Barlett, and Steele, and others in the Knight-Ridder group (Ullmann & Honeyman, 1983, p. 367). Recently, journalist Elliott Jaspin has been deepening the power of investigations by the extensive use of government databases (Jennings, 1989, pp. 13–17).

This condensed account portrays not merely the evolution of a technique but the dynamic redefinition of a good. Not only can journalists come closer to the whole story by using survey research when the circumstances warrant, but they can tell a different story. MacIntyre

declares that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

Other such condensed sketches give an even broader sense of this insight's range of uses. For example, the good of "choosing words and pictures for clarity, precision, and verve" is a fundamental and pervasive end of journalism. Thus, at the turn of the century, the photographs of Danish immigrant Jacob Riis and his spirited writing brought to life the squalor of New York slums and police lodging houses. They also provided a model for progressive journalism which influenced the muckrakers and generations of investigative journalists (Alland, 1974, pp. 11–48). During World War II, Edward R. Murrow voiced word pictures over radio that set a standard not only for foreign correspondence but for domestic broadcast as well. Subsequently, his courageous TV documentaries and vivid reportage combined words and pictures in a way that compelled not only public attention but also an emulation by practitioners that profoundly influenced the medium. Pursuit of the goods of journalistic expression set a standard of excellence that allowed certain subjects, from the character assassinations of Joseph McCarthy to the misery of migrant workers, to be set before the public more effectively than ever before (Emery & Emery, 1988, pp. 381–382, 395, 401, 425–428).

Literary Journalism

In *The Real Thing*, Tom Stoppard (1982) remarked that "words are sacred; they deserve respect," adding: "If you choose the right ones, in the right order, you can nudge the world a little." In that spirit, the *New York Herald-Tribune* set standards of excellence in writing (Kluger, 1986). Many practitioners of the literary or *new journalism* of the 1960s and 1970s trace their lineage to "the *Trib*." These new journalists portrayed parts of North American culture either for the first time or in new, powerful ways. They investigated the culture of the drug scene and captured the lifestyle changes introduced by the civil rights, environmental, and consumer movements. The inner thoughts and outward behavior of yuppies, technocrats, and dropouts sprang to life in their prose. Their devotion to a literary standard of excellence in writing reflected a change in the conceptions of the goods that could be served by practicing journalism. True, some literary journalists have played loose with facts and distorted context. Internal corrective mechanisms are not fully developed in literary journalism. Yet, collectively, these journalists have systematically extended journalism's powers to achieve excellence. Their work, if not universally admired, has been collected for study by aspiring journalists (Sims, 1984).

Numerous examples exist of journalistic behavior intended to preserve the good of freedom of expression. The murder of Arizona reporter Don Bolles during the peak of his investigation of land development scandals in 1976 triggered a major response by his colleagues. Led by Bob Greene of *Newsday*, who called Bolles's murder "the ultimate assault on First Amendment rights" (Mollenhoff, 1981, p. 344), the team set out to show that killing a reporter would not shut down his investigation. It deployed 6 reporters working full-time, supported by 30 others assisted by 26 news organizations and several foundations. Their 32 stories were credited with focusing unprecedented public attention on Arizona's organized crime problem. Then attorney general Bruce Babbitt said the public pressure, plus new evidence and leads turned up by the team, helped bring Bolles's killers to justice in 1977 (Mollenhoff, 1981, p. 344).

A rather different episode in pursuit of the good of free expression developed in the wake of publication of the Pentagon Papers. The *New York Times* first gathered and published these documents, which were classified government documents showing how the United States entered the Vietnam war and became mired there in what proved to be a futile effort to prevent Communist domination of that southeast Asian nation. Publication prompted a federal injunction against several newspapers, including the *Times* and *Washington Post*. It represented the first case of prior censorship since the famous case of *Near v. Minnesota* in 1931 (Lambeth, 1986, pp. 132–136). Had the federal injunctions been allowed to stand, it would have established a dangerous precedent of government interference with press freedoms. For the citizenry, it represented a denial of access to information needed to assess whether the government, as then constituted, was capable of either waging war or making peace.

At one point in the landmark case, which the Supreme Court decided for the press in a split, 6–3 decision, the issue came before federal appeals court Judge David Bazelon. When the Pentagon claimed that publication would betray a national security secret, Bazelon called into his office the attorneys for both sides, plus one reporter, George Wilson of the *Washington Post*. There, the Pentagon identified the "secret" as the fact that the American military had broken the code of the North Vietnamese navy. Quickly, Wilson's knowledge, foresight, and skill as a reporter sprang suddenly into play in the judge's chambers. He reached into his knapsack and located a passage from a congressional hearing which disclosed that the government itself had made public the secret in a Senate investigation of a naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964. Media critic Ben Bagdikian wrote that it may have been Wilson's talents for truth telling in difficult circumstances that turned the tide against the government in a historic case in which freedom of

expression was at stake (Lambeth, 1986, pp. 132–136). It also took courage to stand up against the Pentagon and took a sense of justice to insist on press freedom.

A New Look at Media Criticism

Several scholars have noted that both popular and professional criticism of the mass media is underdeveloped, impressionistic, and much in need of a sense of direction (Carey, 1976, pp. 7–11; Cockburn, 1986; Dennis, 1985; Lambeth, 1986, pp. 80–96). MacIntyre's definition and discussion of a social practice idea may well provide a new vocabulary and a new way of looking at media criticism. They frame for media criticism and scholarship the very elements that need emphasis. These are significantly improved professional skills, creation of organizational cultures in which the virtues work in tandem with those skills, and a continuing discourse on the goods of journalistic practice.

Especially useful for media criticism is the link MacIntyre made between institutions and practices. "Indeed, so intimate is the relationship of practices to institutions," wrote MacIntyre (1981), "that [they] characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideas and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution," adding: "In this context the essential function of the virtues is clear. Without them, without justice, courage, and truthfulness, practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions" (p. 194).

Social Forces Require Critical Scrutiny

These insights are relevant to media criticism in several ways. First, the drive for profits, market domination, and corporate control exerts steady pressure on journalistic integrity. These forces require the kind of scrutiny that only a few critics, such as Bagdikian, now give them. Second, MacIntyre would argue for an appropriate and unself-conscious use of virtues and vices not merely to describe behavior but to explain the choices of media practitioners. He avoided the rigid separation of fact and value so characteristic of the modern social sciences. Third, MacIntyre's analysis raises the question whether a new journalistic standard of excellence can be developed around reporting on the health of social practices. That could supply a more concrete and useful focus than, for example, the Hutchins Commission's suggestion that the press give a "representative picture of the constituent groups of society" (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956, pp. 87–92). Reporting on the concrete elements that advance or retard the pursuit of excellence in the practice of law, medicine, education, the ministry, law en-

forcement, and business is a more clearly focused objective than portraying the constituent groups of society. It also is, arguably, an objective likely to provide more direct benefits to society. Fourth, identifying journalism's internal and external goods and continually assessing their interplay can help rescue media critics from superficiality and personalism. Finally, critics can offer missing perspective by being alert to what we might term *MacIntyrean moments*—those opportunities journalists have to reconceptualize, transmute, and extend the goods of the practice.

Part of the new context MacIntyre provided for media criticism and scholarship comes from his emphasis on cultivating a sense of the history of one's practice. Entering a practice is no light matter. MacIntyre (1984) explained the goods of a practice can

> Only be achieved by subordinating ourselves within the practice in our relationship to other practitioners. We have to learn to recognize what is due to whom; we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage, and honesty. (p. 191)

MacIntyre believed that to enter a practice is to enter a relationship "not only with contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extend the reach of the practice to the present point" (p. 192). The past, in this view, is not a nostalgic montage of ill-remembered facts and chronicles. It is a living tissue that connects the best of the present with a past from which practitioners can actively learn.

Because practitioner communities of the kind MacIntyre has in mind are relatively small and cohesive, a MacIntyrean history is most likely meant as an account of a specialty within the larger history of journalism. Although journalism historians have lately been more productive and experimental than ever before, the kinds of journalism histories implied by MacIntyre's work are largely unwritten (Information to, 1988).

Stunted Development, Evolutionary Dead Ends

It may well be that new critical histories of journalism along MacIntyrean lines will show stunted development and evolutionary dead ends. That is, it has not been until recent times that practitioner subcommunities such as science and investigative journalism have been as cohesive and internally communicative as implied by the model of dynamic change proposed by MacIntyre. And it also may be that only a

few news organizations enjoyed cultures strong and histories long enough to contribute materially to the advance of the practice. Whether these hypotheses are tested through historical studies and substantiated, or discarded, they seem to hold heuristic promise for both media history and media criticism.

As a neo-Aristotelian with a virtue-based approach to ethics, Mac-Intyre found himself in a minority among modern moral philosophers, most of whom are in the analytical tradition. That is to say, most are less concerned with normative ethics (what should be done and why) than with analytic philosophy—the semantics, logic, and epistemology of ethical dialogue. And although his Aristotelianism carries with it a concreteness that can be appealing to many who specialize in the field of professional ethics, there is no doubt that MacIntyre challenges much that now is done under the rubric of applied ethics.

In his view, most applied ethicists make a fundamental mistake of assuming that there are timeless, ahistorical principles or rules to which all rational agents would assent. Applied ethics, in the sense criticized by MacIntyre, purports to take these universals and work out the implications in particular contexts. MacIntyre argued that the best evidence against this approach are the irreconcilable disputes over universals among the contending philosophical viewpoints. In contrast, MacIntyre (1984) argued for the idea of "enduring principles" (p. 508). As set forth by Plato in the *Gorgias*, such a principle is one "which remains rationally undefeated through time, surviving a wide range of challenges and objections, perhaps undergoing limited reformulations or changes in how it is understood but retaining its basic identity through the history of its applications" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 509).

These "tested by fire" principles and the discussion of them as guides to behavior in actual cases constitute what MacIntyre regarded as the core of living moralities that are part of philosophic traditions. These are principles from which can be derived determinate rules that actually resolve moral problems. In contrast to enduring principles, there are *simulacra of principles*. By nature, they are general and indeterminate. As examples, MacIntyre cited sentences purporting to give moral meanings but without clear endings, such as: "One ought to tell the truth, but there are a range of occasions on which truth telling is problematic and then . . ." (p. 5509) or "One ought to obey the law, but there are a range of situations in which lawabidingness is problematic and then . . . " (p. 510).

Thus, in the sense criticized by MacIntyre, journalists might be perceived as having entered the Pentagon Papers episode embracing the rhetoric of justice as obedience to the law but with exceptions invoked at its own convenience, willy nilly. In fact, however, the Pentagon Papers case represented more than a willful challenge by the press of

the government's legal power to label certain documents as secret on grounds of national security. First, the press accepted the court as an arbiter. On court order, it delayed publication while the case was ajudicated. Second, in as much of a collective judgment as is found in recent times, the American press said again to the world that its ethical system embraced obedience to law, with a clear exception that it would resist prior censorship, indeed, as it had in *Near v. Minnesota* (1931). An ethics of journalism along MacIntyrean lines grew from a practitioner community actively discussing such principles as truth telling, justice, and freedom, and developing rules, together with carefully drawn exceptions, that guide behavior.

On the other hand, applying simulacra of principles, MacIntyre (1984) argued, does not advance moral understanding nor do decisions made with such formulations accumulate precedents that shape future behavior (p. 511). It is for that reason, he suspected, "that in a time of relative economic hardship" applied ethics has "flourished financially as well as in other ways" (p. 508).

MacIntyre conceded that there also are contemporary examples in which a "rediscovery of morality as such" is underway, despite the fact that it flies under the rubric of applied ethics. In such instances, he noted approvingly, the participants, such as in medicine and the military, are carrying on the more generic discussions in which Aristotle, Maimonides, Aquinas, Kant, and Mill would feel at home. The recent case in which a source filed a breach of promise suit because editors overturned a reporter's pledge of confidentiality (*Cohen v. Cowles*, 1989), shows the lack of such consensus building ethical dialogue in newspapers. (Cunningham, 1988, pp. 6-8; Fitzgerald, 1988, pp. 11-33; Isaacs, 1988, pp. 12-13; Langley & Levine, 1988, pp. 21-14; Winfield, 1989, pp. 3-5, 23-24; Zuckerman, 1988, p. 61).

Conclusion

Although there clearly is much that can be gained from MacIntyre's work by journalists and journalism educators, they also will encounter problems. First, although MacIntyre said both *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* were written for assimilation by those not formally trained in philosophy, both books contain a level of technical detail that some will find uninviting if not insurmountable. Second, although his (1984) article in *The Monist* is of direct interest to media ethicists, the ethical content of most of his recent as well as earlier work must be mined patiently and extrapolated carefully to be made useful to the professions. Third, for someone whose Aristotelian sympathies incline him toward what MacIntyre would call "social particularity," there are few even moderately detailed examinations of so-

cial practice and the ones to which he briefly alluded—chess, painting, physics—may not resonate with most practitioners. Finally, if the moral fabric has deteriorated as seriously as he believed, more could be expected from MacIntyre than the suggestion that we build forms of local community in which civil, moral, and intellectual life can be sustained.

Nonetheless, despite these reservations, the trumpet sounded by MacIntyre awakens, even though we cannot quite tell whether the message is reveille or taps.

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