Universal Ethical Standards?

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If a quest for universal ethical standards in journalism is to be productive, we should first be able to articulate an overarching set of universal ethical standards that can apply across cultures, across ethical schools of thought, across professions. In this article I offer 4 likely universal standards that have relevance to journalism, suggesting universal journalism standards can also be identified. Although these and other standards will not be panaceas for the ethical dilemmas journalists often face, they provide needed anchors for decision making.

If we are to undertake “a renewed quest for universal ethical standards in journalism,” we should be able to articulate at least a few universal standards to assure ourselves that the journalism quest has potential. We also should illustrate that the broader standards are applicable to journalism. Otherwise, why begin the journalism quest?

Logically, universal ethics should satisfy, or at least not be inconsistent with, the core principles of the major ethical schools of thought—including teleological or utilitarian approaches, the deontological or duty-driven approach of Immanuel Kant, Aristotle’s Golden Mean, Judeo-Christian tenets, and so forth. Although this article may suffer from a Western orientation, the universal nature of values it offers is not contradicted by discussions of Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Islamic, and other non-Western cultures reviewed in the course of developing the article (Christians & Traber, 1997; Merrill, 1994; Saunders, 1934; Wiener, 1974).

In this article I seek to identify a handful of possible universal values and briefly discuss how these values are applicable to the practice of journalism.

Been There, Done That?

John Merrill (1989) reviewed the quest for wide-ranging journalistic ethics in the context of concerns of the 1970s and 1980s with regard to the New World Information Order and controversies over the relationship between government and the press.
Merrill (1989) wrote that Nordenstreng, then-president of the International Organization of Journalists, has asserted that an international journalistic ethics “implies two significant steps beyond what is typically held in the libertarian tradition with its passion to remain free from any socio-political obligations other than the pursuit of truth”: (1) an invitation for the journalist to support a number of universally recognized ideals and to fight corresponding evils, and (2) an awareness that universal values are vital constituents of the profession of journalism—such values being a commitment to truth, integrity, and other characteristics of professionalism. (p. 217)

Along those lines, after meetings in Paris and Prague in 1983, the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the International and Regional Organizations of Working Journalists¹ advanced 10 ethical principles to guide and inspire journalistic codes of ethics. These principles, briefly stated, called for the following:

1. Rights to acquire accurate information and rights to free expression.
2. Unbiased, in-depth reporting.
3. Accountability to the public.
4. High standards of journalistic integrity.
5. Access to information.
6. Protection of privacy.
7. Respect for community and democratic values.
8. Respect for universal values and cultural diversity.
9. Commitment to the elimination of war and other social evils, such as racism, colonialism, and poverty.
10. Promotion of a New World Information Order that would restructure the international communications system (Merrill, 1989, pp. 219–220).

In 1980, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems published its report (Many Voices, 1980) that discussed norms of professional conduct for journalists and reported that there is general recognition of the fact that journalists have responsibilities not only vis-à-vis their own convictions but also towards the public. Summarily, four kinds of responsibilities may be defined: (a) contractual responsibility in relation to the media and their internal organization; (b) social responsibility entailing obligations towards public opinion and society as a whole; (c) responsibility or liability deriving from the obligation to comply with the law; (d) responsibility towards the international community, relat-
ing to respect for universal values. These four types of responsibility may in certain respects be contradictory or even conflicting. (p. 241)

The range of concerns and issues addressed by Nordenstreng, the MacBride Commission, and others was as daunting as it was provocative—provocative but not altogether productive. The global ethics discussion became entangled in issues related to the New World Information Order and, eventually, the United States’ withdrawal from UNESCO. International codes also may founder because of ambition and specificity. They try to do too much—end wars, protect privacy, and make sure journalists spelled names correctly!

International codes … try to do too much.

Perhaps a more helpful approach is found in the work of Christians and Traber (1997) as they surveyed cultures around the world to identify universal values, or “ethical protonorms.” Traber concluded that certain ethical protonorms—above all, truth-telling, commitment to justice, freedom in solidarity [freedom blossoming in an attitude of responsibility for each other], and respect for human dignity—are validated as core values in communications in different cultures. These values are called universal not just because they hold true cross-culturally. … The universality of these values … is rooted ontologically in the nature of human beings. It is by virtue of what it means to be human that these values are universal. (p. 341)

Cued by Christians and Traber (1997) this article starts with ethical concerns in general and moves to journalism. That path seems less tortuous than focusing on journalism alone and being overwhelmed by the burdens and challenges journalists face in a global context.

Three Ground Rules

At the outset it should be recognized that, by definition, “universal standards” will be general in nature, perhaps disappointingly so. Just as they will not solve global problems they will not provide ready solutions or be panaceas for many nitty-gritty issues in journalism—such as under what circumstances it is ethical to identify a crime victim. On the other hand, the articulation of even general ethical standards should suggest that some of the routine arguments against such efforts need not discourage us from our journalism quest.
For example, at the outset, we should dispense with the notion that widespread or long-term acceptance of a practice by a particular culture or society is sufficient evidence that the practice is ethical, relatively speaking of course. Racism, genocide, and other evils have been widely practiced and well established in one society or another; however, no one defends such practices as ethical. Further, we should be able to demonstrate that every situation is not necessarily or routinely different, that our universal standards—as simple as they might be—are not situational. Such a view runs counter to the it-all-depends answer frequently given when journalists are asked about news coverage ethics. Such a response is invoked so often that one can imagine a journalist offering this response when a spouse asks, “What time will you be home from work, dear?”

Well, it all depends. Maybe I’ll run off with a news source and never see you and the children again. Maybe I’ll get upset at the office and assault Henry and have to spend the night in jail. Maybe I’ll get picked up for shoplifting that toy we so desperately want for Junior but cannot afford. You just never know.

But you should know. In most contexts and relationships, people should (and do) know what to expect of one another.

Universal standards—even if identified and agreed on—would not be cost free. The notion that an ethical act is one that does not harm or injure someone, as compassionate and desirable as that may be, cannot withstand even cursory analysis. After all, what makes many ethical decisions so vexing—why they are dilemmas—is that someone may suffer as a result of an ethical act. That condition is worsened for the conscientious journalist because, although one may escape immediate harm from an ethical act, others may suffer.2

Rationally, we should be willing to accept the consequences of our actions. If we do something wrong, we may figure we deserve whatever punishment is in store for us; we knew the risks going in, so we shouldn’t complain about consequences. A journalist’s contract often is not that simple. The journalist may do right in reporting details of a death, divorce, crime, bankruptcy, and so on. However, it is not the journalist who suffers from such publicity. The journalist can understand why it is important to report the address of a home that was burglarized and can recite the ethical argument for doing so. But the 85-year-old widow who lives in the home may be fearful of the burglar’s return. If so, she will view a news report as invasive and will not be assuaged by the journalist’s argument that her fears are unwarranted or, if warranted, part of the price that must be paid in an open society.
One final thought on being cost free: Perhaps this, or any, search for ethical standards is confounded by the thought, or desperate hope, that recognition and acceptance of such standards will make life easier for all concerned, saving both time and anguish. Knowing the right thing to do, however, does not make a decision easier or less grievous. For example, even if one’s parent has signed a living will, stipulating that no heroic measures be taken to prolong life, that provision does not lessen the trauma or the grief of the survivors’ decision to “pull the plug.” All a living will provides is confidence that perhaps the decision is the right one. Maybe that is the most we can ask.

Knowing the right thing to do does not make a decision easier.

This article’s understanding of ethics follows that of Isaiah Berlin (1980):

Ethical thought consists of the systematic examination of the relations of human beings to each other, the conceptions, interests, and ideals from which human ways of treating one another spring, and the systems of value on which such ends of life are based. These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do, are objects of moral inquiry; and when applied to groups and nations, and, indeed, mankind as a whole, are called political philosophy, which is but ethics applied to society. (pp. 1–2)

Consequently, we approach ethics in the context of community. In the profound insight of Merrill (1989, who may have been paraphrasing Sartre), “we are individuals who create ourselves as we interact with others.”

Four Standards

With an ethic of reciprocity in mind, this article advances four universal standards as starting points. At best, these standards suggest it is not folly to proceed in a quest for universal ethical standards in journalism. The remainder of the article lists and discusses the standards in a journalistic context.

- Use Restraint: Violence should never be the first resort in conflict resolution.
- Know thyself: Self-deception—lying to oneself—is not a healthy practice for an individual or for a society.
- Respect others: Do not abuse one’s authority or stewardship.
- Be accountable: One bears responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions.
Applications to Journalism: Starting Points

If the previous four general standards are universal, they should be applicable to journalism. To that end, here are a few of the conditions that help shape the discussion about applications to journalism (with apologies for what may be obvious):

Journalism with a news orientation rules out government information programs—setting aside much of the controversy involving what was called the New World Information Order. The following discussion tries to apply the ethical standards without emphasis on First Amendment protection, necessary if standards are to be global.

Nonetheless, the power and popularity of the idea of free expression is undeniable. Although the First Amendment is not exportable, Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (p. 19). Granted, the history of the Declaration and Article 19 is United States influenced. Further, widespread adherence to Article 19 and whether it would be adopted today are open to question. Nevertheless, Article 19 remains on the books, and a universal standard of journalism ethics would ignore that only at its peril (Many Voices, 1980).

Given constraints of space, this discussion does not explore existing codes, such as those of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) or company-wide codes of media groups. Nonetheless, conspicuous by its absence in the four standards offered in this article is the principle of truth telling, the first principle of the SPJ code (Black, Steele, & Barney, 1999) and one articulated well by Lambeth (1992) in shaping “an Eclectic System of Journalism Ethics” (pp. 24–27). Four of his widely quoted five principles of truth telling, humanness, justice, freedom, and stewardship of free expression—all but truth telling—can be accommodated within one or more of this article’s standards of respect, accountability, and avoidance of self-deception.

Although Christians and Traber (1997) identified truth telling as the first of four universal values, truth telling simply does not fare as well in this article. Perhaps it is for idiosyncratic reasons—which include considering journalists as reporters rather than truth tellers. Therefore a bit more discussion is required as to why truth telling is not included in this article’s list of supposed universal ethical standards. It is not sufficient to say that Lambeth (1992) and Christians and Traber already have made a compelling case for truth telling and it need not be reiterated here—even though that is the case.

Certainly, ethical behavior requires us to stretch. Ethical standards are goals more than they are habits. But generally we can be accountable if we
want; we can respect others if we but make the effort; and introspection can offset self-deception. Sometimes, however, we cannot tell the truth even when we desperately want to because we don’t know what it is. Perhaps that is reading too much into the principle of truth telling, but Bok’s (1979) distinction between telling the truth and being truthful was persuasive. Bok (1979) opted for “being truthful,” or for truthfulness: Being truthful meant sharing what you believe to be accurate information. “Telling the truth” had troubling connotations because, among other things, we may not know what the truth is; people who are convinced they have the truth have done horrible things to those they consider to be in error, and sometimes people use truth telling to hurt others.

This perspective is guilty of thinking of the concept of truth telling as more than being honest and trying to be as accurate as humanly possible in the reporting of the human condition. The idea of turning to the local paper or to television news for truth telling is not a comfortable concept for at least the following reasons.

As noted earlier, this article defines journalism somewhat narrowly in terms of a news orientation. That news orientation differs from communication settings that are interpersonal in nature and more amenable to “truth telling” discussions, perhaps because the participants in an interpersonal setting may be on more equal footing to evaluate information given and received than is the case, say, with Dan Rather’s network news audience.

Journalists … reduce the degree to which audiences are misled.

Almost all we know about news gathering and news reporting speaks to how fraught with potential error those processes are. Live coverage compounds the problem as news audiences accompany reporters down blind alleys. Reporters are not so much oriented toward telling the truth as they are toward reducing the degree to which they and the news audience are misled. Efforts to be honest and accurate—or, efforts to not intentionally deceive—seem fairer measures of the ethics of news reporting than does truth telling.

In that spirit, perhaps the ethical newspaper should carry a warning label or warranty:

The contents of today’s newspaper should be treated with care. The information collected and presented was done so under circumstances and conditions that, history has shown, are error prone. The newsroom budget and funds available to help assure accuracy are
constrained by the corporation’s fiduciary responsibility to stockholders. Consequently, the reader is advised to seek multiple sources of information and to be sure to read the paper tomorrow for any corrections or clarifications or for new developments needed to put today’s news into perspective. Although we cannot warranty that all information in today’s paper is accurate, we do warranty that our editors and staff practice no intentional deception, and we do abide by an affirmative duty to publish corrections promptly and fully.

Having explained why truth telling is not in this article’s list, two caveats are needed: (a) Some version of truth telling is likely to appear in any final list of “universals” because it speaks to what the audience expects, rightfully or not, of journalists, and truth telling may, after all, be short hand for the journalist’s efforts to be accurate and honest. (b) Having closed the front door to “truth telling,” at least in this article, it is not the intent to treat “knowing thyself” as “truth telling” in different clothes. A distinction is drawn between being truthful with oneself and being truthful with others—just as it is drawn between privacy and openness—although the two are related and, as suggested previously, one needs to be honest with oneself as a condition of being honest with others.

Having digressed to explain why truth telling is not included in the list of universal standards, we now consider more fully those that are.

Applications to Journalism: Perspectives on the Four Standards

Use Restraint: Violence should never be the first resort in conflict resolution.

Neither violence nor violent are found in the news-oriented codes of the American Society of Newspaper Editors or the SPJ. Yet news reporting historically and theoretically has instrumental value among those seeking nonviolent resolution of social conflicts. As president of Washington College, Robert E. Lee looked to law, journalism, and other disciplines to help rebuild the South and to provide alternatives to the violence of war, according to Lee biographers and Washington and Lee University, renamed in Lee’s honor.

First Amendment theorist Thomas I. Emerson (1970) recognized the “safety-valve” nature of the Amendment:

Freedom of expression thus provides a framework in which the conflict necessary to the progress of a society can take place without destroying the soci-
It is an essential mechanism for maintaining the balance between stability and change. (p. 7)

A universal ethical standard that abhors violence as a first resort is unworkable unless there is concomitant recognition of the need for open discussion and the accompanying journalistic culture as appropriate, necessary alternatives.

On a less global scale, the standard against violence as a first resort counsels patience to the journalist in coverage and commentary on controversial, perhaps explosive, community issues. Historically and theoretically, the standard must be part of a journalistic ethic, if only to suggest what journalism can contribute to its society.

Know thyself: Self-deception—lying to oneself—is not a healthy practice for an individual or for a society.

Journalists often pride themselves on matters of integrity and self-awareness. Critics routinely are told that no profession is as introspective. In such declarations journalists typically have reference to their endless conversations about how a news story was or was not covered or should have been covered. But to “know thyself” and to avoid “self-deception” require more than being candid about one’s mistakes.

For example, Merrill (1996) wrote the following:

Self-deception, for the existentialist, is the greatest vice, for it robs man of his personhood, his integrity; it deludes him into thinking that he is nothing more than a robot having an essence pushed upon him by outside forces. Man makes himself, says the existentialist, or defines what he is in the course of choosing, acting, and existing. (p. 34)

Self-deception by the journalist can also corrupt the news audience. The audience relies upon reporters to somehow avoid the human tendency to know what they are looking for and, voila, they discover and report evidence to support their self-deception.

For the journalist, the pressures for deceiving oneself as well as a sometimes willing news audience come from within and without. Forget about the corporate powers and pressures that have been well-documented (Cranberg, Bezanson, & Soloski, 2001); think about the sports fan who expects the local paper to support the potential and the prowess of the hometown football team, regardless of evidence to the contrary.

The concept of news judgment requires that editors and reporters be aware of their predilections so they can make story evaluations and word
choices based on the significance of a news event and not on their biases or the drive to hype a story.

Social psychologist Erich Fromm (1966) also linked self-awareness and being a good reporter:

To be able to listen to oneself is a prerequisite for the ability to listen to others; to be at home with oneself is the necessary condition for relating to others. (p. 113)

For these and other reasons, the universal ethic of “Know thyself” must have a place in universal standards for journalists. As the laws of physics can be ignored or dismissed only at one’s peril, so it is when we kid ourselves on personal matters. Unfortunately, while journalists pay considerable attention to concerns regarding the deception of others in the reporting process, concerns with self-deception do not fare as well.

Respect others: Do not abuse one’s authority or stewardship.

Principles of respect and stewardship are inherent in ethical relations and articulated in the Golden Rule teachings of Confucius, Christ, and others. For our immediate purposes, we focus on concerns for the weaker party and Eric Fromm’s (1966) perspective on respect. Relevant here, too, is the Kantian maxim that we treat people as ends, not as objects or means.

Fromm (1966) advised that the journalist’s concept of objectivity has more to do with “respect” of another’s point of view than with detachment or disinterest. Perhaps we disagree with a view, but generally we can respect a person’s right to hold such an opinion and be able to faithfully report his reasons for doing so. Fromm stated,

Objectivity is not, as it is often implied in a false idea of “scientific” objectivity, synonymous with detachment, with absence of interest and care. How can one penetrate the veiling surface of things to their causes and relationships if one does not have an interest that is vital and sufficiently impelling for so laborious a task? (p. 111)

As suggested earlier, ethical standards seldom call for or demand respect for authority or for those in position of power (although they certainly do not forbid it). The concern is more with stewardship, of not abusing one’s own authority, power, or influence.

Risks of abuse are high when people become subjects of news stories in unwanted or unexpected situations. Consider tapes of 911 telephone calls. In panic, an individual calls 911, seeking help in what often is the most traumatic experience of the person’s life. However, the audiotape and transcript
of the call may be a public record, readily available for broadcast on that evening’s television news or for reprinting in the next day’s newspaper.

**Needed perspective? Or harm to a victim?**

Journalists say such coverage provides the audience with a needed perspective on an incident of community concern and also holds public agencies accountable for their responses. Perhaps. Most people, however, have heard enough such rebroadcasts to know that public agencies usually respond in competent fashion. It is questionable just what needed perspective is provided by exploiting the anguish of the victim or witness. Locally, on the anniversary of a tragedy, a television station replayed the unsettling 911 telephone call a woman made seconds before she drowned as her car sunk in a rain-filled quarry. The tape was rebroadcast as part of a story on safe driving in bad weather!

In less dramatic events, respect is illustrated in its most simplistic form in getting the other side of the story and in being fair in treatment of news sources. This principle might be carried an additional step when the reporter anticipates the criticism a source may be subjected to as a result of news coverage and gives the source an opportunity to respond even before the criticism is raised.

For example, a local newspaper several years ago had a story about “young love.” Why the paper gave the story the treatment it did is puzzling. Nonetheless, the story dealt with two high school students, both in their teens, neither particularly bright, and both sort of social outcasts and from dysfunctional or broken homes. Nonetheless they found each other, and their love resulted in the premature birth of triplets. By the time the third infant had died, the medical bills were approaching $500,000, presumably to be paid by public funds. But the couple still professed love for one another.

That was the essence of the story. Surely, in keeping with the standard of respect and stewardship, the reporter should have anticipated some of the obvious reactions to such pathos. All the reporter needed to say to the girl and boy was, “You know, some people are going to be upset with you and wonder how or why so much money should be spent because of what you did. What would you say to these people? How would you answer them?”

However, as it was, in the “young love” story, the reporter and the paper just left the couple to fend for themselves. The naive couple seemed to relish the attention they were getting before the reactions set in. They soon broke up.
If a news reporter is going to lay bare the lives of the vulnerable, it would seem ethical to provide the vulnerable with a measure of protection from exploitation or with the opportunity to defend themselves.

The standard of respect is faithful to at least the first half of the axiom that it is the journalist’s duty to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Be accountable: One bears responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions.

Given much of the preceding discussion, perhaps the question is not whether journalists should be accountable, but rather what should they be accountable for, to whom should they be accountable, and who holds them accountable?

If the focus is on what journalists are accountable for, these five concepts of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press (1947) remain as good a baseline as any. The commission’s litany held that the press should be accountable for providing as follows:

A truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that gives them meaning.
A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.
The projection of a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.
The presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society.
Full access to the day’s intelligence.

Regarding accountability, Bonhoeffer (1971), the theologian, wrote as follows:

The man who feels neither responsibility towards the past nor desire to shape the future is one who “forgets,” and I don’t know how one can really get at such a person and bring him to his senses. (p. 203)

Regarding the two questions (a) To whom is accountability owed? and (b) Who holds one accountable? as troubling as the shorthand answers may be, when we come to ethical concerns, the answers seem to be (a) others and (b) self.

Conclusions

The quest for universal ethical standards in journalism is worthwhile and may be productive. This article has advanced four general standards
that can be applied across cultures and across ethical schools of thought. The standards also have relevance for the day-to-day practice of journalism. However, the ethical anguish inherent in that day-to-day practice will not be eliminated even if there is agreement on what universal standards should shape decisions. Agreement on some ethical anchors, however, would be a giant step away from the “it-all-depends” mentality.

In further consideration of these issues, more time could profitably be spent in looking at both truth telling and self-deception as to their utility in helping understand what journalists are and should be about. Certainly it would be helpful if, in discussions of truth telling as a universal principle, authors would make it clear that what they have in mind is more in terms of being honest than in issuing infallible pronouncements.

Inherent in our quest is the irony of seeking the universal while recognizing that perhaps it can only be found or realized ultimately in the individual. Kant captured the irony in this passage from his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe ... the starry heavens above and the moral law within. (quoted by Leslie, 2000, p. 76)

### Notes

1. The organizations included the International Organization of Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, the International Catholic Union of the Press, the Latin American Federation of Journalists, the Federation of Arab Journalists, the Union of African Journalists, and the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists.

2. In discussions such as this, participants often invoke the physicians’ dictum of *Primum non nocere*. The “first do no harm” credo in medicine, however, typically deals with physical effects (but allows amputations, of course) and not with information sharing. When it comes to what information should be shared with a patient and the family and when it should be shared, physicians can be as “at sea” as journalists and *Primum non nocere* is not a panacea.

### References


