Deon and Telos: How Journalisms Are Evolving Their Ethical Approaches

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Abstract: Survey evidence shows a deontological ethical ideology remains dominant in global journalism, underpinned by a cultural value of detachment. This article opens by considering the strain imposed on these precepts in US corporate media while covering the Trump White House—ultimately to breaking point with the defeated president’s campaign to overturn the result, attempting to co-opt news organisations in the process. Feedback loops of cause and effect have, in any case, been exposed in today’s extended media, making the involvement of journalism in stories—through influence on audience responses and source behaviours—impossible to overlook. At the same time, new journalisms are emerging and growing, which adhere instead to a teleological ethical ideology. They openly identify themselves with external goals, and appeal for funds from donors and supporters on that basis. The article then goes on to present original data from analysing statements of aims and purpose put out by 12 news organisations working in four of these new fields: Peace Journalism; Solutions Journalism; Engaged, or Participatory Journalism; and Investigative Journalism, respectively. These represent a growing edge in journalism, it is argued, since they are positioned to respond positively to the changed conditions brought about by political and technological forces, which were illustrated by the Trump crisis. The study points to the changes in institutional arrangements now needed, if the structural foundations for their survival and success are to be strengthened.

Keywords: Peace Journalism; Solutions Journalism; Engaged Journalism; Participatory Journalism; Investigative Journalism; Journalistic Ethics

On Thursday, 5 November 2020—two days after the federal election—three US television networks cut away from covering a live podium address by Donald Trump in the White House. The president was making unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud. On MSNBC, which was the first to stop broadcasting the feed after just 35 s, presenter Brian Williams told viewers the move “was not done as a stunt, or out of theatrics”, but rather, “we just can’t have it. It was not rooted in reality and, at this point in where our country is, it’s dangerous” (in Grynbaum and Hsu 2020).

Williams’ on-air explanation embodied an ethic of responsibility. Behind it lay well-founded suspicions that Trump was aiming to rouse his ‘base’ among the electorate, to prompt donations ostensibly for legal expenses in challenging the results, and ultimately precipitate some attempt to thwart the democratic handover of power. The decision by NBC, closely followed by ABC and CBS, “deprived Mr Trump of a significantly larger audience for his unfiltered—and un-fact-checked—remarks on the election”, the New York Times reported (ibid.). The networks realised that, by broadcasting Trump’s address live, they were being co-opted into his plans, and risked becoming at least instrumentally responsible for the consequences. They evidently did not care to be so.

It is difficult to overstate the seismic implications of this event for political journalism. In the eyes of his opponents, Trump demeaned the office of president. However, the incumbent of the White House is—regardless of identity—the most important single newsmaker in the world. (Indeed, for many years, the Washington press corps’ code when reporting information obtained off the record, if it came from the office of the president,
was to attribute it to “an unimpeachable source”. Then came Nixon—and later, of course, the twice-impeached Trump). For the networks to make a deliberate decision to switch off the Commander-in-Chief in mid-flow was an indication of just how conflicted they felt.

For news executives, the discomfort was nothing new. Months earlier, Daniel Klaidmann, Editor-in-Chief of Yahoo News, decided to stop live-streaming Trump’s briefings on the coronavirus crisis when misinformation regarding administration responses—and the supposed efficacy of quack treatments—was compounded by the president’s attacks on the media. “I decided in consultation with my bosses that our default position ought to be: Don’t take the feed, monitor it closely and when we deemed something newsworthy, cut back in”, he told an interviewer (in Wemple 2020). By then, a frisson of unease had already convulsed the industry after the widely reported death of an Arizona man who ingested chloroquine phosphate, an additive used to clean fish tanks that is also found in an anti-malaria medication touted by the president as a treatment for Covid-19. The dots joined themselves: he would never have received the information and formed the fatal plan without the media conveying Trump’s baseless advice into his home.

This study begins by discussing some of the challenges for journalism of immersion in the present conjuncture of technological, economic, and political forces. The moment of Trump’s podium address, it is argued, encapsulated some of these challenges, which call for dominant cultural values and role perceptions to be reassessed. It then proceeds to consider four types of journalism, practised in liminal spaces and sustained by non-commercial funding, focusing on public statements in which they are seen to adopt a different set of values and role perceptions from the mainstream. These show how journalism is evolving, it is argued, in response to the challenges of the moment.

1. Detachment and Non-Involvement as Ethical Precepts

Journalists report facts—things that have happened, that already exist. However, facts, such as White House podium addresses, are created for them to report. Establish a pattern or convention of reporting—that a president’s words will be carried live and unfiltered, for instance—and it will feed back into source behaviour. It can then be harnessed to attempts at causing things to happen, or bringing about facts that do not yet exist.

This insight conflicts with the single cultural assumption or role perception that is, according to survey evidence, the most widely shared among journalists worldwide. In the Worlds of Journalism (WoJ) project (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2017), over 6000 participants from 60 countries were asked to signal the extent of their agreement with a series of statements. The latter were arranged into three fields, concerning:

• The institutional role of their journalism, in wider society;
• Their epistemological approaches, and
• Ethical ideologies, respectively.

On a Likert scale, one ethical precept, in particular, met with a coefficient of agreement of well above four out of five points—the highest in the study—in virtually every country: “Detachment and non-involvement [in their stories] ... are considered essential journalistic functions around the globe” (Hanitzsch et al. 2011, p. 273). It underpins the cultural values and assumptions encapsulated in the phrase “journalism without fear or favour”, coined by New York Times founder Adolph S Ochs; but also, the complaint about newspapers by pre-war British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, that they wield “power without responsibility”.

To adopt an ethic of responsibility implies that one is in favour of something, which inescapably means being against something else. Williams spoke for his own and MSNBC’s concern to protect American democracy from the “danger” in which Trump had placed it. Another name for it is a teleological ethic, from the Greek telos, meaning ‘goal’: that is to say, oriented towards a frame of reference outside itself as journalism, and inviting assessment in that frame—for its contribution, perhaps, to progress in meeting the goal. Against this teleological approach, the dominant strand of western journalism—of which the household names of US media, mentioned here, are seen as prime exponents—generally adopts a
deontological stance, from the Greek deon, meaning ‘duty’: a function to be performed for its own importance and place in the overall scheme of things. In a scenario traditionally put to journalism students, what do you do if you find out something significantly to the discredit of a prominent person you otherwise admire or approve of? The standard answer? You should report it, on some or other variant of the universalising principle formulated by Immanuel Kant: “I ought never to act, except in such a way that I would will that my maxim in so acting could become a universal law” (Butler 2003, p. 8).

Equally familiar are the philosophical knots into which journalists can be tied by attempting to reconcile their own perspectives—that which they admire, favour, or approve—with their function. In choosing which facts to report, from a practically infinite range of alternatives, they inescapably make value judgements. “While the rules of journalism prohibit reporters from making subjective interpretations”, Pedelty remarks, “their task demands it” (Pedelty 1995, p. 7). Thomas Nagel famously recommended getting round this contradiction by adopting a seemingly oxymoronic “view from nowhere”, though this turned out to mean nothing more than taking steps to “compensate for the peculiarities of our point of view” (Nagel 1986, p. 90), all the while accepting that there could be “aspects of reality beyond . . . our capacity to form conceptions of the world” (Nagel 1986, p. 91).

2. Post-Truth and Postmodernism

Trump’s signature mode of governance was often held to epitomise a ‘post-truth’ world, of course—one in which facts, as established starting points for a correspondence theory of representation (including both medical science and the counting of votes cast in elections), have gradually lost definitional power in public discourse. With that, the “age of high modernism in American journalism” has been pronounced dead (Hallin 1992). A share of blame for this situation is sometimes apportioned to western academia, with particular reference to the supposed ascendancy of “postmodernism” in humanities and social sciences, and its practical non-utility (Wight 2018). When the Oxford vaccine against Covid-19 was produced, researchers with a taste for mordant self-mockery joined a parlour game on Twitter to suggest variants, appropriate to the characteristics of their own universities. So, a Goldsmiths vaccine—from the London college famous for its critical scholarship—would “use audio, visuals and liminal spaces to deconstruct the very concept of a vaccine”.

Jacques Derrida, one of the most influential contributors to such scholarship, noted that “there is always already deconstruction, at work in works” (Derrida 1986, p. 123). There is an inevitable and constant surplus of meaning over intentionality. Formulate any notion of value and you simultaneously fashion—and hand over to opponents—the tools necessary to unravel it. Even (or particularly) in the extremis of a global pandemic, there is no shortage of noise from anti-vaxxers. However, “the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself”, he added (Derrida 1978, p. 279). So, what is to provide this centre, when all else fails? “What remains irreducible to deconstruction . . . is a certain experience of the emancipatory promise” (Derrida 1994, p. 59).

Trump’s podium address attacking the integrity of the federal election result was a moment in televised time—but a “moment”, also, in the pivotal sense defined by the Hungarian political philosopher, György Lukács: “a situation . . . distinguished from the process that leads up to it in that it forces together the essential tendencies of that process, and demands that a decision be taken over the future direction of the process... Depending on how the situation is handled, the process takes on a different direction after the ‘moment’” (Lukács 2000, p. 55, emphases in original).

The passage is quoted by Freedman in a discussion of the Herman and Chomsky Propaganda Model and its enduring salience as “an account of media power” (Freedman 2009, p. 59). He goes on to argue that “moments of political crisis and elite disagreement” can expose “cracks”, allowing outbreaks of exceptional plurality in corporate media representations of ambiguous causal scenarios. Since Freedman’s article was published, the mediatisation of politics has further intensified. We are living through what Castells (2007)
was the first to call an era of “mass self-communication”, which has created “a new media space . . . where power is decided”. The process reached its critical situation—its “zenith”, as Lukács put it—in Trump’s conduct of government by incontinent tweeting.

An ethic of responsibility waxes in proportion with the foreseeability of consequences, Max Weber argued a century ago in his landmark essay, Politics as a Vocation. Now, the feedback loops linking news with foreseeable audience responses and source behaviours have been exposed, with brutal clarity, to journalists and their publics alike. “A deontological journalistic ethic is merely a teleological one ‘in-waiting’: waiting for a convincing explanation of cause and effect” (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, p. 218). The explanation has arrived and is starkly visible.

In summary: the political impacts and consequences of journalism now tend to be exposed quickly and clearly in today’s extended mediascapes. In this situation, the deontological ethical stance that is dominant in global journalism tends, in turn, to be embarrassed—and was ruthlessly exploited by Trump to add a misleading glaze of authority and facticity to his pronouncements. The experience of this ‘Trump moment’ has added impetus to the need for journalism to fashion a workable teleological ethic instead: which is awkward, because it means being against some things and in favour of others. The awkwardness is both an effect of, and a contributory factor in, the decay of institutions founded on truth and certainty—a decay that has in turn been analysed (and arguably hastened) by the application of such radical ‘post-modern’ discourses of contemporary scholarship as Derridean deconstruction.

3. Denialism at the BBC

Elsewhere in corporate media, there is still a strongly discernible strand of denialism. BBC News attracted ridicule when veteran columnist Peter Oborne (2019) reported that senior executives at the corporation “tell me they personally think it’s wrong to expose lies told by a British prime minister because it undermines trust in British politics”. It was quickly denied, but the claim struck a chord because political editor Laura Kuenssberg’s Twitter feed had, by then—in the heat of a general election campaign—become a regular conduit for an unnamed “Number Ten” source to disseminate material, including obvious falsehoods (Manavis 2019), with the equally obvious aim of influencing political process. Indeed, it turned out to be embedded in an elaborate apparatus for spreading “disinformation”, coordinated with numerous “sock puppet” social media accounts (Jukes 2019).

Once again, the established convention of reporting was leading to the provision of facts for a journalist to report. However, the BBC, unlike the US networks on the later occasion, continued as though oblivious to the way it was being harnessed and exploited. Its response arguably incentivised further lies. Prime Minister Boris Johnson falsely claimed, before the election, that the Withdrawal Agreement he had negotiated with the European Union would impose no extra paperwork for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. When the BBC reported this, it was presented as a point of view, to be ‘balanced’ by others—not as a falsehood to be exposed. As if confirmed by this response in a (career-spanning) assumption that he could lie with impunity, Johnson would later claim, equally falsely, that the subsequent Free Trade Agreement, finalised a year after the election, would impose “no non-tariff barriers” on imports and exports between the UK and EU. The nearest the corporation came to calling out this lie was for Economics Editor Faisal Islam to report it as a “manifest error [which] had business leaders falling off their chairs” in astonishment (Islam 2020). In any case, by then, the damage was done.

Time, perhaps, to recall Michael Schudson’s caveat to any analysis of news content and its determinants that proceeds from a study of political economy: “The media are formally disconnected from other ruling agencies because they must attend as much to their own legitimation as to the legitimation of the capitalist system as a whole” (Schudson 1995, p. 270). They can ill afford to appear less well-informed, or more credulous, in other words, than their audiences. Survey evidence shows “the proportion [of the UK public] that trust most news most of the time has fallen from... 51% to 40%” since 2015 (Fletcher
2020, p. 30). A recent poll showed Independent Television (a commercial broadcaster) is now more trusted than the BBC (Jones 2019).

A separate survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed trust in BBC news had declined most markedly among respondents who self-identified as “very left-wing” or “very right-wing” in their political views (Singh 2020). At the time of writing, new entrants to the UK market for television news were queuing up to start catering for such viewers, at least on the right. One of them, GB News—fronted by veteran Conservative journalist Andrew Neil—was vowing to change “the direction of news debate in Britain [which] is increasingly woke and out of touch with the majority of its people” (Neil 2021).

If the global media elite—embodied in the wealthy, powerful news organisations name-checked and quoted thus far—is in crisis, it can be identified as a crisis of news values. Its underlying causes can be detected in the contradictions outlined above, which have been intensified by technological changes. However, it has also been exacerbated by political agency exerted from the right, especially (though not exclusively) in the US and other jurisdictions where free-market variants of capitalism dominate.

Conservative political actors have sought to undermine evidence-based procedures for representation and meaning-making since at least the point when climate science started coming up with reasons why capital needs to be more rigorously regulated, in its modes of accumulation and reproduction, for the sake of planetary survival. The ‘logic’ has seldom been better encapsulated than in the quote attributed by Ron Suskind (2004), in the New York Times magazine, to an unnamed official (later claimed to be Karl Rove) in the administration of George W Bush:

The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community’, which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality’. [...] ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore’, he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do’.

An ethic of duty had always mandated detachment from the stories covered and the interests and perspectives competing within them. This “ethical ideology”—as the WoJ study puts it—was underpinned by newsgathering routines that privileged officialdom as the source of authoritative information. Herman and Chomsky point to a “moral division of labor”, in which “officials have and give the facts” while “reporters merely get them”. Such practices allowed news to present itself as belonging to a reality-based community. However, the capture of official sources by a campaign to offside that community set the components of this ideology awry, with implications that have been placed under a harsh spotlight in today’s extended media space. (So, for example, Kuenssberg’s tweets exposed the nature of the relationship, thus showing how political journalism is made—held to make it less palatable, as with sausages).

The organising principles of “information-based journalism”—pinpointed by Hallin and Mancini as a hallmark of “high professionalization” in both the “North/Central Europe or Democratic Corporatist Model” and “North Atlantic or Liberal Model” of media-state relations (Hallin and Mancini 2004, p. 68)—have become much more difficult to identify, defend and maintain. The “canonical” connection between this concept of journalism, and its credentials as a civic tool in democracy, is losing analytical salience, and has been pronounced beyond its “shelf-life” (Zelizer 2013). The structure is in danger of lacking a centre and becoming thereby unthinkable.

In summary: the deontological ethic dominant in global journalism was implemented through a set of newsgathering and reporting techniques based on obtaining and purveying authoritative information, which elevated official sources to a privileged position to set the agenda for news and frame issues within it. This was held to underpin the role
of journalism in holding power to account, thereby enabling political transparency and participation. However, this privileged role has been exploited as a means of exerting political control, and its relations of production exposed with ever greater clarity—which has, in turn, brought it into disrepute.

4. The New Teleological Journalisms

How is journalism responding to this crisis? Or, we may more accurately enquire, how are journalisms—plural—doing so? Here, I turn away from the commanding heights of the global media economy to the “liminal spaces” attributed to the apocryphal “Goldsmiths vaccine”. Technological, social, political, and economic changes, while compromising traditional newsgathering practices and funding sources, have simultaneously opened and widened margins for new and diverse forms. These typically present their journalism not as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit, but rather as a cause to be appealed-for. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated this shift, so that the actual mediascapes of 2020 bore a growing resemblance to the projections for them in a study heralding “post-industrial” news, published eight years previously by New York’s Columbia School of Journalism:

There will be more nonprofit news organizations, driven by several kinds of donation—direct cash subsidy by philanthropies and other donor organizations . . . user donations of cash . . . and in-kind donations of the time and talents of a particular community. (Anderson et al. 2012, p. 107)

On what basis do the journalisms of liminal spaces appeal for donations? For this study, statements were gathered, all setting out aims, objectives, and/or formulations of mission and purpose, and sent to or intended for actual or prospective supporters.

The overarching Research Question was to investigate whether, how and how far they display cultural values and role perceptions in common with each other. As part of this, the study set out to identify differences shown by these journalisms from what the Worlds of Journalism study showed to be the globally dominant mainstream. Particular attention was paid to any sign of a telos, or goal, adopted by the journalism in question: what, if anything, were they against, and in favour of? As discussed below, the precise nature of the questions emerged from a study of the data.

5. Method

Data came from statements—aimed at actual and/or prospective donors or supporters—from three news organisations working in each of four new and expanding forms of journalism. The statements were typically contained in email alerts and/or ‘brochureware’ on the news organisation’s own website. The forms of journalism selected for the study were:

- Peace Journalism, based on a set of distinctions originally proposed by Johan Galtung (1998), which has served as the organising principle for both journalist training and scholarly media analysis, as well as initiatives in journalism practice. It is seen as one of multiple “challenger paradigms” (Hackett 2011, p. 34) that have seeded and grown in the rapidly changing media of recent years. Peace Journalism has been defined as “when editors and reporters make choices, of what to report and how to report it, which create opportunities for readers and audiences to consider and value nonviolent responses to conflict” (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, p. 6).
- In Solutions Journalism, reports of social problems are augmented with accounts of successful policy responses.
- Engaged, or Participatory, Journalism uses a variety of methods to share with audiences the news functions of agenda-setting and framing.
- Investigative Journalism is a time-honoured form, but one that has now evolved significantly, drawing on access to caches of electronically stored information, and collaborations with a range of organisations including NGOs and specialist researchers. In the process, it has arguably become a speciality of niche websites and publishers, thereby joining the other three as a ‘new journalism’ for these purposes.
Why these? That each comes with its own prescriptive prefix, committing to particular pre-conceived practices of newsgathering, compilation, storytelling, and dissemination, is enough to predict that the role perceptions of journalists working within them are likely to differ from those revealed as dominant in the WoJ study. An early critique of Peace Journalism from a senior western-employed journalist, the BBC correspondent David Loyn, argued that journalism should operate without limit except where “proscribed” from doing so (on legal grounds, say); whereas any attempt to “prescribe” what journalism should do was “uniquely unhelpful” (Loyn 2008, p. 54).

Then they differ, in turn, from journalisms belonging to a category that Hallin and Mancini, in their study of media-state relations quoted above, call “political parallelism”. They can be distinguished, for instance, from the radical media—also a growing sector, and one with venerable roots and antecedents—which conceive of themselves as contributors to a specific movement. (So, for instance, the US-based Jacobin Magazine averred, in an email canvassing for donations in February 2021, that: “Movements need ideas. Our new issue examines the November election and more to try to chart a way forward”. It promised to address the topic of “what it will take to build a left-wing oppositional movement for justice and peace in the Biden era”. In the UK, the equivalent Left Foot Forward, founded in 2009 as “the home of political news and comment for UK progressives”, included, in its weekly email to supporters on the same date, an appeal for funds that included the following mission statement: “We deliver progressive, independent media, that challenges the right’s hateful rhetoric”).

So, the selected news organisations are members neither of the corporate mainstream, nor—declaratively at any rate—of any political movement, except in the broadest sense. They are examples of what have been called “virtuous journalisms” (Waisbord 2019, p. 11). Selection was based on longevity—that the news organisation in question has been established, up and running for longer than two years in each case—and activity in publicising its journalism: that is, each one either operates a regular email service to subscribers and a list of potential supporters or displays material about its mission and its conception of its role, on its website. Those chosen are:

- From Peace Journalism:
  - Mindanews (Philippines);
  - VIEW Digital magazine (Northern Ireland);
  - Correspondal de Paz (Mexico).

- From Solutions Journalism:
  - Positive News (England);
  - Positvr (France);
  - The Narwhal (Canada).

- From Engaged/Participatory Journalism:
  - Pro Publica (US);
  - Platform Authentieke Journalistiek (Netherlands);
  - Correctiv (Germany).

- From Investigative Journalism:
  - OpenDemocracy (UK);
  - Mint Press (US);
  - Bureau of Investigative Journalism (UK).

Some of these span two (or more) categories. Pro Publica, Authentieke Journalistiek, and Correctiv are known for investigations, but all have run major newsgathering and reporting projects by soliciting and harnessing audience engagement and participation. The definition adopted for this study of Engaged or Participatory Journalism does not mean “anyone can be a journalist”; rather, it entails keeping the lead role for a trained professional, while “seeing the process of that professional working alongside citizens as an integral part of the work of doing journalism” (Koniczna 2020, p. 593).
The majority of news organisations in the sample operate in Europe or North America, though the presence of one each from majority-world Mexico and the Philippines, and three others from non-Anglophone countries—making nine in total—represents an attempt, even in this small-scale study, to emulate the global scope eventually attained by the Worlds of Journalism project.

One statement was used from each news organisation: in each case, the most recently dated material containing a substantive reference to their own conception of their function and purpose. So, the nature of the source material varied according to the practices of the news organisation in question. Some, such as the UK’s OpenDemocracy, rely on individual donor funding, so send out regular appeals to an email list—and, in such cases, the most recent email was selected for analysis. Others, such as the Philippines’ Mindanews, are underwritten instead by institutional donors, so communications explicitly stating such concepts are far rarer. In such cases, statements on the news organisation’s website were selected.

For analysis of the statements, the unit was a key rhetorical scheme: a “scheme” being a self-contained figure of rhetoric, and one that was “key” in that it played the role of distinguishing the news organisation from others, often deviating from a norm defined as a corporate media ‘mainstream’. (So, some of the statements contained more than one scheme). A grounded theory approach was adopted, where the data were allowed to guide the theory. Patterns began to emerge through open coding, regarding the news organisations’ representations of their structure, process, and nature of outputs, respectively.

Structure includes such matters as staffing policy, and, in some cases, relations with sources. In the Northern Ireland-based VIEW Digital, for instance, guest editorship is handed over to significant civil society actors for editions with a specialist focus, so this would be an example in the ‘structure’ category. As to process, this was of particular salience when considering statements by news organisations in the Engaged/Participatory field, referring to the roles to be played by audience members in gathering, compiling, and disseminating news. Content refers to statements specifically regarding the material the news organisation produces and publishes.

These three themes were adopted as categories, then broken into sub-categories using axial coding: a process conducted with due attention to Strauss and Corbin’s three-pronged approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). So, this was followed by selective coding, involving a micro-analysis of observations based on the themes identified in prior layers of coding.

The sub-categories were:

- Whether the goals of adopting or creating the specified structures, processes, or outputs were internal, concerning the nature and activities of the organisation itself—or external, that is, geared towards achieving some extra-organisational effect;
- Whether these goals were represented in general or specific terms;
- And whether, overall and after considering the coding of the first two sub-categories, the rhetorical schemes embodied a deontological or a teleological journalistic ethic for the news organisation as a whole.

6. Results

All the news organisations in the study design their structures, conduct processes, and create outputs in pursuit of external goals, as summarised in Table 1, below. These vary in the degree of specificity, but in that sense, they all display a teleological ethical stance, thus, differentiating them from the dominant global orientation revealed in the Worlds of Journalism study.

Notable examples included the Investigative Journalism website, OpenDemocracy, which allows unlimited free access to its pages, while appealing for reader donations. One such appeal, sent in an email, contained a key rhetorical scheme signalling the specific external goal of its outputs: “exposing systemic problems in hopes of speeding change” (OpenDemocracy 2020).
ProPublica—established, like many of its US-based peer organisations, to benefit from tax exemptions as a so-called Section 501(c)(3) non-profit—solicited and analysed data from readers who were also Facebook users, in a participatory investigation showing the social media giant was in violation of privacy laws (Tobin 2018). This was in keeping with two rhetorical schemes in its mission statement, regarding both the general internal goal of its process: “We dig deep into important issues, shining a light on abuses of power and betrayals of public trust”; and the specific external goal of its outputs: “using the power of investigative journalism to spur reform” (ProPublica 2021).

In Peace Journalism, Mindanews, a web-based media cooperative in the southern Philippines (which has been supported by Australian and Canadian development aid) adopts a specific internal goal, in its process: “add[ing] three Cs—context, characters and consequences—to the traditional journalistic five Ws and H, of who, what, where, when, why and how” (founding editor Carol Arguillas, quoted in Lynch 2013, p. 21). Its website carries a statement about its structure, with a key rhetorical scheme that signals a general external goal: “Mindanews is . . . composed of independent, professional journalists who believe in and practise people empowerment through media” (Mindanews 2021).

VIEWdigital, a monthly magazine and website from Northern Ireland (or the North of Ireland), released a statement (in January 2021) for prospective subscribers and supporters, which opens by stating its commitment to “cover the news that other media never reach”, comprising “topical social issues”. It contains a key rhetorical scheme indicating that this specific internal goal is to be achieved by process, reaching out to sources that are likewise routinely missed out of other media accounts: “We inform debate by including international and national voices, as well as local ones. We recognise the diversity of voices around us”.

The word “diversity” should be interpreted, in this context, as a rejection of the familiar dyadic pattern of public discourse that is a legacy of violent conflict—thus also embodying a general external goal for its output. The accompanying email text elaborated further, and clarified that this goal is also pursued through the editorial process:

What makes us different is the collaboration with community activists. We’re currently working on producing and publishing journalism with campaigners on older people in care homes during Covid-19, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The group trusts our journalism and having a ‘guest editor’ from the campaign helps us to set the news agenda for this edition.

The Narwhal, a Canadian magazine and website with a news agenda heavily skewed towards environmental concerns, won recognition for one of the Solutions Journalism stories of 2019 (Tompkins 2020), about a programme to provide alternative employment for workers made redundant from the ‘carbon bomb’ Alberta tar sands industry. Its mission statement commits to “more thoughtful, inclusive journalism”, using its story-telling power “for the public good”. This general, external goal is to be achieved through its own structure:

The Narwhal recognizes that environmental journalism must be grounded in respect for Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous rights and must foreground Indigenous voices . . . The Narwhal is committed to building a team that includes Indigenous voices and reflects the communities we serve . . . A diverse team enhances the relevance and substance of our journalism and is essential in fulfilling our mission to foster a deeper understanding of some of the most contentious issues of our time. (Narwhal 2021)

Mexico’s Corresponsal de Paz harnesses its outputs to a specific, external goal: “Our main objective is to disseminate examples of peaceful practices, and to demonstrate their existence and viability. We want to make visible those stories that contradicts the idea of a hostile world . . . Our initiative, based on pacifist content and journalistic rigor, seeks above all to inspire, among our readers, a multiplier effect” (Corresponsal de Paz 2021).
Correctiv, which is funded by a mixture of foundation grants and public donations, sets a general external goal for its outputs: “Our goal is an enlightened society. Because only well-informed citizens can solve problems and bring about improvements democratically”. This is made possible by a structure which has, in turn, a specific internal goal: “We initiate investigations which we make available to cooperation partners or investigate directly together with our partners. Thus, complex projects that classic editorial teams would hardly be able to handle on their own, are made possible”. Furthermore, the engaged, participatory nature of their journalism makes it a process with a specific internal goal: “For many investigation projects, we call on citizens to work together with us. For example, we jointly collect data and information about their local situation, which we then use for stories of supra-regional significance”.

For a major investigation into relations between the Dutch government and the Anglo-Dutch oil major, Shell, Platform Authentieke Journalistiek “developed an innovative digital dashboard”—a process with the general internal goals of maintaining transparency and “encourag[ing] reader participation” (Platform Authentieke Journalistiek 2021). This was in pursuit of the specific external goal, to be achieved through its outputs, of “contribut[ing] to a just and democratic society”. PAJ sets out to “contribute to the political struggle of (groups of) people who are suffering from exclusion, exploitation, (repression and) other forms of injustice”. As well as identifying such problems by a process of working “together with those concerned”, PAJ “formula[es] the solutions to these problems”.

Positivr, a website that has been practising Solutions Journalism in France since 2014, announces the goal for its output in specific, external terms: “Our ambition: to highlight the actors of change, the creators of solutions, the projects which work for an ecological and social TRANSITION” (Positivr 2021). It also pursues this goal by the process of “opening its columns” to new voices excluded from mainstream French-speaking media.

UK-based Positive News publishes daily online and as a quarterly magazine, with an external goal for its output that—without the reference to “transition” of its French counterpart—feels more general: “rigorous and relevant journalism that is focused on progress, possibility, and solutions” (Positive News 2021). It pursues this through its structure as well: “Through our #OwnTheMedia crowdfunding campaign, in 2015 Positive News became a community benefit society (a form of co-op) invested in by more than 1500 people in 33 countries, age 18–89, who each have equal influence. Our directors are elected by and from our community of co-owners”.

Mint Press, a US-based Investigative Journalism website, which has made documentaries on the effects of Washington foreign policies including in Colombia, marked its nine years of existence in 2020 with a renewed crowd-funding appeal, dedicating itself to a general external goal, to “challenge official narratives and hold the billionaire class accountable” (Mint Press 2020). More specific external goals can be inferred from a reference to mainstream corporate media “towing the same official government line that led to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other disastrous policies left unchallenged by the powers that be”.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism is proudest of its outputs that have “prompted official inquiries in the UK, EU and US; influenced changes in British policy on refugees, housebuilding and care homes; and resulted in greater transparency about civilian casualties in America’s covert drone war”. This specific external goal is presented as a subset of a general one, of “crusad[ing] against the backward drift of human rights”, and is also achieved by structure, as an “independent not-for-profit organisation” (Bureau 2021).
Table 1. The table shows the distribution, among the news organisations, of key rhetorical schemes in the mission statements or funding appeals, in the categories set out above.

| Goal | Min | VIEW | CdP | PN | Posr | Narwhal | Pro | PAJ | Corr | OpenD | Mint | BIJ |
|------|-----|------|-----|----|------|----------|-----|-----|------|-------|------|-----|
| SIS  |     |      |     | x  |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| SIG  |     | x    |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| PIS  |     |      | x   |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| PIG  |     |      |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| OIS  |     |      |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| OIG  |     |      |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| SES  |     |      |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| SEG  |     |     |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| PES  |     |     |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| PEG  |     |     |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| OES  |     |     |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |
| OEG  |     |     |     |    |      |          |     |     |      |       |      |     |

Key: Min = Mindanews; VIEW = VIEWDigital; CdP = Corresponsal de Paz; PN = Positive News; Posr = Positivr; Narwhal = The Narwhal; Pro = ProPublica; PAJ = Platform Authentieke Journalistiek; Corr = Correctiv; OpenD = OpenDemocracy; Mint = Mint Press; BIJ = Bureau of Investigative Journalism. SIS = structure internal specific; SIG = structure internal specific; SES = structure external specific; SEG = structure external general. PIS = process internal specific; PIG = process internal general; PES = process external specific; PEG = process external general. OIS = output internal specific; OIG = output internal general; OES = output external specific; OEG = output external general.

7. Conclusions

All 12 of the news organisations in the study included some kind of rhetorical scheme, in their mission statements or appeals to potential donors, indicating their pursuit of external goals (hence, the preponderance of marks in the bottom half of the table). To that extent, they are all teleological. They are in favour of things, and prepared to state how they design their structures, conduct processes, and create outputs in order to pursue and enable them.

The degree of specificity varies, and there are particular points where this sub-category is of particular significance for the character of the news organisation in question. The difference between Positivr and Positive News, noted above, may appear minor—a matter of nuance. However, without explicitly allowing for the possibility of system change, or “TRANSITION”, Solutions Journalism could replicate what the social theorist, Robert Cox critiqued as a “problem-solving” approach, which—by “take[ing] the world as it finds it”, serves to validate existing systems (Cox 1981, p. 128).

In general, though, we can discern, from this material, how the components of a teleological journalistic worldview fit together. The news organisations studied here set out to “spur”, “speed”, “prompt”, “inspire”, or “encourage” pro-social reforms, and to “include” and “highlight” those working for them. They conceive of their own journalism as both enabling, and being enabled by, such reforms. They take responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of patterns of representation. What goes for Peace Journalism goes for all of them: conscious of being “unavoidably implicated in the loops and coils of conflict dynamics” (Lynch 2014, p. 31), they “create opportunities” for audiences to “consider and value” (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005, p. 5) positive ideas and initiatives for change, sometimes including system change. Furthermore, they all stand to benefit from novelty value among audiences jaded and jaundiced with news-as-usual, which has been found to result from exposure to Solutions Journalism, in particular: “an effective solution can soften the blow of negative, conflict-based news and result in more positive attitudes toward the news article and toward possible solutions to the problem” (McIntyre 2019, p. 31).
Between these commitments, they can fashion a structure within which to work—one that has a centre, because they are all impelled by some or other version of an experience of emancipatory promise. So, they remain thinkable, in the challenging circumstances of today’s media. They have no need for unease when their role in feedback loops, connecting them with audience responses and source behaviours, is exposed, because they are open about them. The increasing struggles of traditional western journalism—equipped chiefly with a deontological ethical approach—should enhance and burnish the credentials of these four new journalisms, in comparison, as a growing edge, and a source of example to be emulated.

One obvious limitation of this research is how far the labels, or prefixes, serve a useful diagnostic purpose for categorizing journalism as an object of study. Each may be seen as containing significant variations within itself: between a transactional approach, in the case of Engaged Journalism, for instance, in which reader engagement is harnessed to improve journalistic sourcing and storytelling; and a relational approach, where the object is a broader cultivation of community trust and cohesion.

This issue overlaps with a cognate one: namely whether and how far it is useful to study these journalistic types together. Contributors to an eclectic gathering of both journalists and academics with an interest in Engaged Journalism were characterised as sharing a commitment to “make journalism better—not just as an end in itself, but as a means to stronger communities, and societies” (Wenzel and Nelson 2019, np). This statement—adopting what I have designated, in this article, as a general external goal—can be seen as denoting a teleological ethic; or, in the title of a recent edited collection, ‘Reporting beyond the problem’ (McIntyre and Dahmen 2021). The latter offers chapters on eight forms, including three of the four considered for the present study, with the editors summarising their common orientation as “productive and socially responsible” (McIntyre and Dahmen 2021, p. 1); responsible, as I have argued, being an equally clear indication of a teleological ethical ideology, which distinguishes these forms, in turn, from what survey evidence has marked out as the global mainstream. The categories and distinctions I develop in this article can, thus, be seen as further contributing to an emerging focus in relevant research, on what have been called “X journalisms” (Loosen et al. 2020).

How could this study be further developed—apart from an obvious need for scaling-up? I have assigned some of the news organisations to a particular ‘x journalism’ even though they do not themselves claim any such label or affiliation. Neither Mindanews nor VIEWDigital, for instance, announce as exponents of Peace Journalism, although any systematic exercise in content analysis of their outputs would certainly reveal them to be so. Indeed, this (content analysis) would be an important supplementary method. Another would be to apply to journalists in the new journalisms a questionnaire-based survey similar to that used in the Worlds of Journalism project, to disclose role perceptions, with particular interest in their “ethical ideology”. From the evidence discussed here, the journalistic culture would most likely be different from that established, through the WoJ study, as the near-universal industry norm.

Journalistic cultures are widely studied because they are seen as one of the chief determinants of news content. Often codified in systems of “professionally related ethics” (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, p. 98), they can affect story selection, sourcing, modes of story-telling and other aspects of news production. However, these are embedded in a “hierarchy of influences”, including “occupational and organizational considerations” (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, p. 111) as well as the familiar array of political economic interests that loom large over relations of production in corporate media.

So, it is one thing to know what journalists intend to do and tell supporters they are doing—but quite another to establish what they actually are doing, especially when the practical application of their professional ethics may be constrained, and often (in a hierarchy) outranked, by these other powerful determinants of news content. The claims and commitments made while appealing to actual or potential donors should be compared...
with what the news organisations in question actually produce. Only then can supporters
know what they are being asked to pay for.

What are the prospects for these four teleological new journalisms to grow? “How
do we reconcile expectations with troubling conditions in the news industry?”, Silvio
Waisbord asked, in a rallying call to journalism researchers (Waisbord 2019, p. 11). He
went on to name-check “overworked reporters, precarious employment and decimated
newsrooms” as merely the conditions endogenous to journalism itself that exert a chilling
effect on aspirations such as those set out in the statements analysed for the present
research. Furthermore, he posed a crucial strategic question: “What is needed to transform
institutional conditions that provide the structural foundations for virtuous journalism?”

If virtuous journalism is not a commodity but a cause, it will require political economic
arrangements to be adjusted to permit and encourage support for it as such. News organi-
sations in other countries eye with some envy the tax-exempt Section 501(c)(3) non-profit
status enjoyed by their US counterparts, such as ProPublica, and the generous start-up
funding from such sources as the Brost Foundation acknowledged in Germany by Correctiv.
In the UK, the official 2019 Cairncross Review on journalism and democracy recommended
permitting charitable status for local news services, which has not yet been implemented.
However, an umbrella funding body, the Public Interest News Foundation, has now ob-
tained Charity Commission approval to receive tax-exempt donations and make grants
(Tobitt 2020).

In Australia, the 2011 Finkelstein Inquiry on media diversity received submissions call-
ing for support for independent news, such as a Journalism Funding Council. None made
it into the final recommendations, but the calls were expected to be revived in submissions
to the forthcoming (at time of writing) parliamentary inquiry into the potentially undue
influence of the Murdoch-owned media. The Covid-19 pandemic was blamed, by BBC
Media Action head of policy research James Deane, for a “massive collapse of independent
media around the world [as] the market model supporting them has gone” (in Lynch
2020)—increasing the onus on development agencies to invest in such media, in partner
countries, to provide a non-market funding model.

From journalism researchers, further study is needed, focusing on news organisations
working in new sectors such as those examined here, to produce publicly accessible
knowledge and information on the roles—both aspirational and actual—they can play
in the multifarious, often cacophonous information spaces where power is decided. The
purpose of such activities will be to clarify and, where appropriate, strengthen their
contributions. The present research is offered as a modest starting point.

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Note

1 The sole supplementary teleological concept that is generally admitted into mainstream journalism is a commitment to “minimise
harm”, as stated in the International Federation of Journalists’ Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists. However,
it is a marginal consideration compared with those discussed in this paper.

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