Ethics of Journalism and Freedom of the Press
Introduction

Freedom of the press - where to draw the line?

By Michael Kunczik

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Introduction:

Freedom of the press - where to draw the line?

Ethics (the term comes from the Greek word *ethos*: custom or practice) is that branch of philosophy whose purpose is to describe moral sentiment, as well as to establish norms for good and fair behaviour. In the context of journalism, this is a question about what is good and what is right journalistically. In the search for answers to these questions, my assumption is that democracy, though afflicted with many weaknesses, is nevertheless the best form of government. A functioning democracy is founded on a communications sector that functions adequately and allows informed public opinion to develop freely.

This is why, in a democracy, journalists have a special political purpose and responsibility. Democracy is, above all, a culture of dialogue, in which the opinions of dissenters are respected. For example, the highest German court (the constitutional court, the "Bundesverfassungsgericht") holds that freedom of the press and freedom of speech are the essential elements of a democratic state, because only the continuous struggle between opinions and constant intellectual debate will safeguard democracy. It is not surprising that *coup d'état* which crushed democratic societies prioritised destruction of free media. So do totalitarian regimes, often using extreme brutality, do their utmost to prevent press freedom emerging.

Freedom of speech and the media is an achievement of the European enlightenment, which must be fought for over and over again and always be defended. Every society has experienced that the powerful in politics and business don't want their affairs critically observed by the media and so find themselves under public scrutiny. Corruption and abuse of power happen everywhere, all the time, and fighting them is a task central to democratic journalism.

I am working on the assumption that in a complex, pluralist, modern society there can be no one absolutely correct ethic. A single journalistic ethic always valid everywhere in the world is currently just as unthinkable. In different countries, a variety of elements form the focus of the ethical debate. Currently in the US (1997), the debate is above all about violence and decency; in the UK it is about tabloid journalism (e.g. reporting on the royal family); in Israel the secrecy of military intelligence is under discussion; and in Germany the impact of the commercialisation of TV (scramble for ratings, superficialisation of programming, sensationalism) is at the forefront of the ethical debate.

You can keep adding to these lists *ad infinitum*. In the following pages, however, the assumption will be made that there is indeed a fundamental and generally acceptable basis for a journalistic ethic - namely human rights. The argument put at international level that human rights are a typical Western invention that may not count in other cultural contexts is in my view intentionally deceptive. In arguing like this, regimes that
hold human rights in contempt want to distract attention from their own disgraceful acts in any way they can.

I am nevertheless aware that my position throughout could have an ethnocentric bias and it is possible that I am under the spell of a logic denounced strikingly by Nigeria's Chinweizu, in his poem "Coloniser's logic":

"The natives are unintelligent - We can't understand their language."

In order to avoid this kind of ethnocentric perspective, authors from different regions were asked to take a position on the journalistic ethic. There were then two possibilities:

1. No terms of reference would be given for the writing of the articles, and for the aspects of ethics being dealt with. The possible advantage would be that a wide variety of points of view would be brought together, albeit at the cost of comparability. The result would ideally be a multi-faceted mosaic of the international ethical debate.

2. Different important aspects of the international ethical debate would be predetermined by myself. And it would be asked that these be dealt with in ways relevant to the respective regions. The disadvantage here is that my view of things, with all its limitations, would be predetermined or forced on the other authors as a structure, so to speak. The advantage comes in enabling an international comparison of the ethical debate.

I decided on a compromise. In an introductory essay, I make the points I deem worth discussing. It was asked that these be considered in writing the articles. Thus, throughout, there was a predetermined content structure. At the same time, however, the authors were asked to lay special emphasis on the aspect of the ethical debate which, in their opinion, is either not valued highly enough, not even considered, or ignored as irrelevant. Thus, a situation where unreasonable weight is given to my understanding of journalism or my understanding of the international debate on journalistic ethics should have been avoided.

Incidentally, I am quite aware that my reference to the UN's Universal Declaration on Human Rights from 1948 is by no means unproblematic. After all, the Charter of the United Nations also contains the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Moreover, many countries reject the position that human rights are universal. I would merely mention one case (of many), in the declaration adopted in Bangkok in 1993 where it was emphasised that human rights must be looked at in various historical, cultural and religious contexts. In interpreting human rights, special traditions and Asian values (Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism) must be taken into account. Instead of an individualistic Western understanding of human rights, collective values must become the point of reference, such as the right to a life without hunger, or the right to work. In other words, quite in keeping with the spirit of the 1986 declaration of the UN General Assembly, where a right to development was proclaimed, for states and people.
In this context it is important to refer to the fact that the United Nations stated the following in its "Declaration on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations": "...we reaffirm that democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms...are interdependent and mutually reinforcing." This tenet is emphasised again in the same document: "While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of all States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, the universal nature of which is beyond question. It is also important for all States to ensure the universality, objectivity and non-selectivity of the consideration of human rights issues." The provocative question is this: Can human rights (in the Western sense) only be achieved in countries that are already developed, and does this also mean that completely different journalistic ethics are the inevitable consequence of this? Moreover, the right to freedom of speech also comprises, in many Western countries, the rights to distribute pornography - an unacceptable interpretation of the concept of freedom of speech for many cultures or countries. The question is: where to draw the boundaries of freedom of speech? This book also tries to answer this question - at least this was the intention. How far this has been achieved is up to the reader to judge. I would like to make clear my normative position on the task of the journalist, with another poem by a Nigerian author, Naiwu Osahon, entitled "The Impotent Observer":

"Don't just sit there gaping at me like an impotent observer because life is a serious matter, suffering is real, and the man writhing in pain is not dancing for amusement."

In other words, I hold the view that a journalist must never be an "Impotent Observer". Journalists can be very "potent" and have proved this many times in the exposure of corruption or of human rights abuses among other things. The power of independent journalism manifests also in the case of the opposition movement in Myanmar, where Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, would have been silenced long ago but for international press coverage.

For the assistance I have received in the composition of this introductory essay, in the development of the matrix of questions and in the preparation of the book, I thank, in alphabetical order, Dr. Dieter Bauer, Reinhard Keune and Gunther Lehrke of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Bonn.
Problems of ethics in journalism

1. Historical background and starting points for a discussion on ethics

I consider it particularly appropriate for a German communications scholar to be writing an introductory essay on the ethics of journalism in an international context, for the ethical debate had already begun in Germany in the 17th century. In 1676 two publications, by Ahasver Fritsch and Christian Weise, dealt with the pros and cons of the new periodicals of the time. Ways of distinguishing what is true from what is false were already being discussed then. Addressing the issue of news selection in 1688, Daniel Hartnack argued that the regular publication of newspapers would create a need for news independent of world events. This writer not only saw the problem of portraying life through journalism, but also pointed out that newspapers appearing regularly were going to have to be filled with information. Finally, in 1690, Tobias Peucer discussed what was newsworthy for a newspaper. Specifically, he asked about news selection criteria and made a list of newsworthy events, wherein the unusual was seen as especially newsworthy, and not so much the regular and the mundane as that which was private. In a 1695 book about "the pleasure and usefulness of newspapers" ("Zeitungs Lust und Nutz") by Kaspar Stieler there was similar discussion about what was newsworthy and a good read. One can trace this discussion in Germany even further back in time, for already the lyric poet, Freidank (circa 1215-1240), recognised what made for interesting news: "Bad news gets louder and louder. Good news dies quickly away."

A discussion about ethics first became urgent the moment journalists became aware of the power they wielded. Ineffectual journalism needs no ethics. And yet surveys done in Germany showed that journalists themselves are more likely to believe that they are relatively lacking in power and influence. This (wrong!) opinion makes absolute sense, for behaviour that has no effect does not need to be subject to public control. The question of ethics poses itself further at the point when there is no longer any strict censorship, for ethical behaviour presupposes freedom of choice. Only those who can freely influence their own behaviour, and who demonstrate responsibility for it, can be judged according to ethical standards. The legitimacy of newspaper censorship was in general not called into question until the 18th century. Rather, the theorists of the absolutist state legitimised censorship on the grounds of raison d'état. Criticism of the head of state was dangerous. The king of Prussia, Friedrich II (the Great, 1740-1786), to get better press coverage had journalists thrashed (among other things) if they did not report the way he wanted them to. Even now in many countries criticism of leading politicians is forbidden, and at times highly risky. Journalists are still beaten, too. In 1995, Abou Sangare, an editor in the Ivory Coast, published an article attacking the security minister, Gaston Koné. TIME (August 14, 1995) gives the following account: "Soon after the story appeared, Sangare was summoned to Koné's office and ordered to drop his trousers - whereupon four policemen took turns pummelling him with truncheons while the Minister looked on." Cabinet minister Laurent
Fologo defended this treatment of a genuine democrat, as follows: "The opposition press degrades us. They need to be more mature." A president of the court in the Ivory Coast who had just sentenced a journalist to a year in prison for an "attack on the honour and dignity of the president," said, "we have a culture which obliges us to honour the head of state."

This kind of arrogance has unfortunately spread worldwide. In many parts of the world there has never been freedom of the press and in many countries where it exists in law journalists making an effort to write the truth are murdered or hounded like criminals. The functions a society assigns to the press or mass media are also decisive to journalistic ethics. Many politicians want the press to be an instrument functioning as a government-controlled transmission belt, so to speak, helping to carry out important processes of social change. Many ideas about a development journalism have come from this type of assumption. But to be effective development journalism can in no way be "government-say-so-journalism" - journalism has to be critical. Critical does not mean destructive, but positive about development, for no planning and no government is infallible. There is corruption and mismanagement everywhere and in the interests of the public they must be exposed.

In Germany, journalism has a public purpose in a legal sense. It is to obtain and distribute news about events of public interest, take a position on them, apply criticism to them, and so contribute to shaping public opinion. Through this, journalism takes on an especially meaningful task in democracy, for which it has special rights (the right to refuse to divulge sources; a right to claim information from authorities), but also special duties. The most important duty is to report fully and correctly, which involves making sure that all news is checked over before it is distributed, with attention paid where necessary to truth, content and also background information. In Germany, a tension is drawn in the field of journalistic ethics between freedom of speech on the one hand, and the individual right to privacy and freedom from media harassment on the other. The communications scholar Wolfgang Donsbach pinpointed this: "The ethic of journalism consists of the seriousness of its efforts to represent the truth. This seriousness, on the other hand, depends on the ability and readiness to exhaust the possibilities for discovery, and to use them in a neutral way. A journalist who does not research certain aspects of a conflict, depriving a few odd people involved of the chance to offer their perspectives, or who chooses certain figures from a set of statistics which support his or her point of view, is not only behaving unprofessionally, but also unethically". If you take this thinking further, you come to a central theme of the ethics of journalism: the distinction between news and opinion, as well as the problem of a possible mixture of the journalistic role with one that is political. Journalists, like any human being, have a particular view of things. They do not see the "truth." They can only attempt to report as objectively as possible, and in doing this, indicate their personal opinion as such. A journalist or an editor who starts the day's work asking, "What can we do today for the government or the opposition?" deserts the field of journalism and becomes a political actor himself/herself.
There are further aspects of journalistic behaviour that require ethical judgement. Specifically, tact and fairness are needed in gathering and using information. In reporting a crime or catastrophe, for example, there is the danger of the victim being victimised a second time through the media coverage. Or certain forms of reporting - for instance, depiction on television news of acts of violence in social conflicts - might intensify those conflicts. Mass media have also driven branches of industry or businesses into near or complete ruin. This happened in Germany with reports about canned fish being allegedly contaminated by worms and noodles produced with allegedly polluted eggs. Whereas in these cases the journalists were confronted with the consequences of their actions, most times journalists remain ignorant of the effects of their reporting.

Journalists are, firstly, reporters, who should report as objectively and neutrally as possible, but without simplifying matters too much in the process. They are, secondly, opinion formers, offering an interpretation of events. This raises the question as to how far they distinguish between news and opinion, and as to how far the reporting is rational, or emotional. Lastly, they work, at least in a few countries, as the "fourth estate."

"The Fourth Estate" is a messy expression and it is not clear who gives journalists legitimacy to control government. Without the fulfilment of this role, though, several cases of abuse of power and of corruption in Germany and other countries would not have been exposed (e.g. Watergate in the US). A democracy needs journalists as watchdogs, even though the journalists are not above the state. But that begs the question: who’s watching the watchdogs?

2. Journalistic ethics: Individualistic aspects

Already highly topical in his time, Kaspar Stieler, referred to above, addressed the unintentional effects of portraying violence in the mass media. He argued that descriptions of crimes can trigger copycat repetitions of them. Here he demonstrated quite the most important problem of an individualistic journalistic ethic: must the journalist take responsibility for the positive and negative consequences of his or her actions, or not? The sociologist Max Weber took up and developed this topic again in 1920. Weber differentiated, as ethical positions, between the ethic of responsibility, in which the correctness of an action is judged primarily according to its foreseeable consequences, and not according to the motives which are the basis of the action, and the ethic of conviction. [In an existing US translation of Weber, Gesinnungsethik is translated as ethic of ultimate ends. This was felt to be unsuitable in the context of this article and therefore I have offered another expression: the ethic of conviction], in which the correctness of an action is judged primarily on the conviction motivating it, and not on its expected consequences. Consequently, all ethically oriented actions can be seen under two fundamentally different and contrasting maxims. Weber, however, does not interpret the ethics of responsibility and of conviction as absolute opposites, but sees complementary elements which only together really constitute a genuine human being.
In *Politics as a vocation* (*Politik als Beruf*) Weber uses this typology in the analysis of political and journalistic actions. A pure follower of the ethic of conviction refuses responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions (1964 p.183): "It is the world which is stupid and mean, and not I; responsibility for the consequences does not affect me, but the others, in whose service I work, and whose stupidity or meanness I will eradicate." The cost of the consequences of the action need not be paid for by the follower of the ethic of conviction (nor does he or she want to pay). If the consequences of an action flowing from pure conviction are detrimental to others, then the follower of the ethic of conviction holds not the perpetrator of the action responsible, but blames either the world for the stupidity of other people, or God's will. The perpetrator is duty-bound to strive with all his or her might for the absolute value, regardless of consequences.

Characteristic of the ethic of conviction is the absolute duty to tell the truth. Here it should be observed that the ethic of conviction has nothing to do with irresponsibility, just as the ethic of responsibility has nothing to do with a lack of conviction. To act according to the ethic of responsibility means not only to deal with the choice of the means to achieve an objective, but also comprises the weighing up of respective goals and values against each other. One must not only consider the direct effects of an action, but one must also calculate the indirect effects, for instance on other goals and values. The person whose actions are motivated by the ethic of responsibility assumes responsibility for the intended and unintended consequences of their action. In contrast to the follower of the ethic of conviction, the follower of the ethic of responsibility does not believe that the negative consequences of his or her action can be off-loaded on to others.

In *Politics as a vocation*, Max Weber asks how far politicians and journalists are prepared to assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Politicians, according to the essence of Weber's analysis, behave according to the ethic of responsibility, and they act in a calculated and rational manner. Politicians assume responsibility for their actions and weigh up the aims, means and possible consequences. Journalists, on the other hand, behave in accordance with the ethic of conviction, in that they strive for truth and shun responsibility for the consequences of their action - although it remains generally unclear what "assuming responsibility" means.

The amount of activity motivated by the ethics of conviction or responsibility among German journalists was researched by Hans Mathias Kepplinger and Inge Vohl (1979). Television journalists were asked whether they were prepared to assume responsibility for their professional activities. A distinction was made between responsibility for the accuracy in reporting and responsibility for the consequences of reporting. With regard to responsibility for accuracy in reporting, more than 80% thought that a journalist should be made responsible, should his or her reporting prove afterwards to be false or untrue, owing to insufficient research. This readiness to assume responsibility increases according to the degree of professional experience. Regarding responsibility for the
consequences of reporting, a distinction was made between positive and negative consequences. More than 85% of the journalists questioned took the view that morally a journalist has rendered outstanding service if positive consequences result from his or her reporting. Conversely, however, only 25% of the journalists held the view that journalists were also morally responsible for the negative consequences of a report. Following Weber’s tenets, one can argue that if only 25% of journalists are prepared to assume responsibility for the unintentional, negative consequences of journalistic activity, then journalists tend to act according to the ethics of conviction. On the other hand, though, journalists are prepared to assume responsibility for false reporting. According to this study, journalists act according to the ethics of conviction when it involves assuming responsibility for the unintended consequences of a report. Whoever takes responsibility for the accuracy of his or her report is in no way obliged to take responsibility for its unintended consequences. Kepplinger argues that because the absolute duty to tell the truth is characteristic of conduct which follows the ethic of conviction, he has discovered in journalists a behaviour oriented to the ethic of conviction.

In a second German study, Mühlberger (1979) carried out research on local journalists, whose most important task was to expose social conflicts and injustices and keep a check on those holding political power. Mühlberger checked whether criticism produced by journalists in the course of their work is motivated by the ethic of responsibility, or whether they are more likely to produce unconsidered criticism, even if the consequences cannot be seen clearly. So, by way of example, the journalists were asked whether they would report on a doctor’s professional error if the doctor might have to stop practising as a result and if the doctor’s departure might mean a loss for the patients. To act according to the ethic of conviction would mean publishing without consideration for the doctor and the patients. To act according to the ethic of responsibility would mean sacrificing the report in consideration of the patients. Fifty-four percent of those asked chose to act according to the ethic of responsibility, 34% opted for the ethic of conviction. Fundamentally, though, actions following the ethic of responsibility and actions following the ethic of conviction are not mutually exclusive. To take further the example of the doctor: should the fictitious doctor be "caught out" by a second or third professional error, then the share of journalists whose behaviour is oriented around the ethic of conviction would surely increase. From case to case, there are obviously different boundaries, which shift between the ethic of responsibility and the ethic of conviction, or from which an orientation toward the ethic of responsibility or to that of conviction might lead to identical behaviour.

Mühlberger (1979) also researched behaviour with respect to information sources in a case study. The journalists were confronted with the problem that a good and important informant has come across a wrong decision, which would be of interest to the public. The following options were available as responses: publishing the wrong decision with no consideration for the parties involved, no matter what the consequences (ethic of conviction); the wrong decision is published in a toned down form, as gently as possible for the informant involved (ethic of responsibility). It was found that journalists who tend towards acting according to the ethic of responsibility with respect to the public would
also sooner act according to the ethic of responsibility with respect to informants. Local journalists are therefore motivated, according to Mühlberger's interpretation, by the ethic of responsibility because they are confronted by the consequences of their actions directly and enduringly. Geographical and social proximity allows the local journalists, at least within certain limits, to calculate the consequences of their actions. Hence it is possible that the ethic of conviction is not an inevitable attitude of journalists, but a consequence of their specific professional situation. In other words, lack of information on the consequences of reporting is a big influence on behaviour. As soon as the journalists have this kind of information, they will be motivated by the ethic of responsibility. [It could be objected in this context that Mühlberger has not quite succeeded in operationalising ethically responsible behaviour. If journalists did not go easy on informants, the sources would probably dry up. In other words, it is in the self-interest of the journalists to go easy on the informants.]

In discussing the question of the ethics of responsibility and of conviction, one must distinguish between different journalistic roles, which make different demands on ethical orientation. Thus, from publishers, managing editors etc., who bear responsibility for the welfare of their media organisation, behaviour more motivated by the ethics of responsibility can be expected. The same goes, surely, for information gatherers who must maintain contact with the information sources. Orientation based on the ethics of conviction can be found more in journalists who have no commitment to colleagues and informants, or who, according to their professional self-image, see themselves as a kind of "fourth estate" or as an organ of control over the government.

In the context of the above, it should certainly not be forgotten that journalistic actions which in general cannot be categorised under the ethics of responsibility or of conviction are not uncommon. There is a kind of journalism which is foul and simply morally reprehensible. This includes false reporting, lies and war-mongering. In 1994, Rwanda's Radio Milles Collines actively stirred up the civil war and genocide by calling on the Hutu majority to rise up against the Tutsi minority. There are several examples of this kind of behaviour, which will not be listed here. Without any doubt, though, this kind of behaviour, undeserving of the name "journalism," brings journalists into disrepute, for their reputation is very often judged on the actions of the worst among them.

In my conviction responsible journalism presupposes that journalism assumes the characteristics of a profession. In other words, it should have expertise in the sense of a technical skill, and autonomy in the sense of self-regulation through a professional body. The question whether or not journalism has the characteristics of a profession is also at the heart of the discussion on ethics, for professions define themselves through self-regulation, as well as with regard to the norms which regulate professional life, and their interpretation in exceptional cases. Technical expertise (writing, editing, researching, dealing with technology, etc.) is quite uncontroversial here. On the other hand, there could be considerable difficulties in bringing about journalistic autonomy (that is, independence from state control), for politicians strive to control journalism to obtain favourable coverage of their activities. A further controversial point is whether the journalist should be a generalist or a specialist (e.g. science journalist, business
journalist, etc.). This is still very close to the as yet unresolved argument as to whether or not one must be born a journalist (in other words, to possess certain character traits, such as the ability to endure clashes with politicians).

An essential aspect in relation to the behaviour of journalists is their image of the public. The way journalists see themselves depends on whom they perceive themselves working for - e.g. the general public, the "educated" people, the government, the masses who must be educated, or the "stupid masses" who "cannot be educated," anyway. It also depends on the motivation for working as a journalist - e.g. exposing abuses, eliminating injustice, maintaining confidence in the state, assisting in development processes, entertainment, making money. The practice of accepting money or other favours in return for coverage of certain stories can be found the world over; this includes, among other things, positive reviews of products or political information.

The way one sees one's public plays a decisive role (e.g. as stupid and unable to learn, as intelligent and capable of being taught, etc.).

3. Codes of ethics

The question as to which norms are to guide the activity of journalists is answered by trying to provide documents on basic principles, such as "Cannons of Journalism," press codes, etc. These kinds of professional ethical documents on basic principles distinguish themselves in most cases through the use of very broad, imprecise formulations, often empty of content and producing platitudes. Thus the "Canons of Journalism" of the "American Society of Newspaper Editors" begins with the following trivial programmatic statement: "The primary function of newspapers is to communicate to the human race what its members do feel and think. Journalism, therefore, demands of its practitioners the widest range of intelligence, knowledge, and experience, as well as natural and trained powers of observation and reasoning." In addition, the statement, "Good faith with the reader is the foundation of all journalism worthy of the name," is, as the main connecting theme for the practice of journalism, not too informative. The problem of applicability to practical journalistic activity is tackled in the professional principles agreed by the "International Federation of Journalists" in Bordeaux in 1954: "Preamble: This international declaration is proclaimed as a standard of professional conduct which every journalist should keep to in his or her work:

1. Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.
2. In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right to fair comment and criticism.
3. The journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin. The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents.
4. The journalist shall only use fair methods to obtain news, photographs and documents.
5. The journalist shall do the utmost to rectify any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate.

6. The journalist shall observe professional secrecy regarding the source of information obtained in confidence.

7. The journalist shall be alert to the danger of discrimination being furthered by media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discriminations based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national and social origins.

8. The journalist shall regard as grave professional offenses the following: plagiarism; malicious misinterpretation; calumny; libel; slander; unfounded accusations; acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression.

9. Journalists worthy of the name shall deem it their duty to observe faithfully the principles stated above. Within the general law of each country the journalist shall recognise in professional matters the jurisdiction of colleagues only, to the exclusion of any kind of interference by governments or others."

As an internationally useful, though strongly interpretative variation on the professional principles, two German communication scientists, Noelle-Neumann and Schulz (1971), name the following 10 points:

1. Awareness of the responsibility of the journalist in the fulfilment of his/her public role in the service of the general public;
2. Protection of internal and external independence;
3. To speak up for human rights, especially for the basic right of freedom of speech, of the press, and of broadcasters;
4. Tolerance towards those belonging to other nations, races and religions. To speak up for peace and international understanding;
5. Respect for the truth. Reliable information about the public, whose sources are checked. Correction of inaccurate reporting;
6. Safeguarding professional confidences, on which trust in a journalist is based;
7. Respect for privacy, and people’s private lives;
8. No defamatory criticism, unless required through legitimate perception of the public interest;
9. No glorification of power, brutality and immorality. Consideration for the special situation of young people;
10. A level of education of journalists which does justice to their high degree of responsibility.

In a survey of 31 European codes of journalistic ethics, Tiina Laitila (1995) ascertains by and large, with respect to the function of these professional principles, how frequently certain things come up: 40% of the codes formulate a responsibility of journalists to the public (e.g. truth and clarity of information; defence of the rights of the public; responsibility, as figures in a position of influence, for public opinion); 23% contained principles referring to protection of the professional integrity of journalists (e.g. protection from public authorities; protection from employers and from advertising
clients); in 22% a responsibility with regard to information sources was found (e.g. requirements about the collection and presentation of information and on the integrity of the source); in 9% of the codes there was something about the protection of status and professional solidarity; 4% contained requirements about responsibility toward employers and 2% had requirements on responsibility toward state institutions.

As the most frequently mentioned principles (contained in more than half of the national codes looked at) Laitila identified:

- Truthfulness in gathering and reporting information;
- Freedom of expression and comment, defence of these rights;
- Equality by not discriminating against anyone on the basis of his or her race, ethnicity or religion, sex, social class, profession, handicap or any other personal characteristics;
- Fairness by using only straightforward means in the gathering of information;
- Respect for the integrity of sources, copyright and laws of citation;
- Independence/integrity by refusing bribes or any other outside influences on the work, by demanding the conscience clause.

No clear-cut answer can be given to the question as to how codes like these influence the behaviour of journalists. A survey conducted among 226 publishers in the US in the mid-1980s showed that newspapers with a code of ethics dealt with ethical violations more strictly than those that had no codes. When David Pritchard and Madelyn Peroni Morgan surveyed two newspapers in Indianapolis in 1989, on the other hand, they found that it made no difference. These authors came to the conclusion that codes of ethics are not much more than a public relations device, irrelevant to professional practice. David E. Boeyink (1994), however, concludes from his case study of three US newspapers that the effectiveness of such principles strongly depends on what significance the management attributes to them, and whether, in discussions with the journalists, the gap between general guidelines and concrete cases is closed. There is too little empirical evidence, though, to answer this question conclusively.

4. Systematic aspects of a journalistic ethic and the public ethic

The extent to which professional principles can achieve their purpose depends on whether there is a professional jurisdiction with sanctioning powers. In the Federal Republic of Germany, for instance, the German Press Council (Deutscher Presserat), in which journalists and publishers are represented equally, has endeavoured since 1956 to support press freedom and to search out and remove abuses in the press. An idea of individual ethics forms the basis of journalistic professional principles. In other words, responsibility is personally assigned to individual journalists. However, that does not take full account of the fact that in many cases individual journalists would definitely prefer to comply with the code, but that conditions do not allow them to. It might simply be a matter of having to make a living; or perhaps the state, using its power, prevents "ethically perfect journalism," preferring lies and manipulation instead. But even a
commercial organisation within a medium, in competition with other media, can prevent the emergence of ethical journalism; it may be that an owner, publisher or manager demands or supports a certain political leaning; it may be that the pursuit of profits leads to a preference for a certain kind of content (e.g. sex, crime and human interest are big sellers); it may be that, owing to the pressure of current events, ethically perfect journalistic work (e.g. in research) is prevented or that quite unethical behaviour (e.g. invasion of privacy, use of illegal methods to procure information) is supported. Commercialisation can also mean that the criteria for journalistic quality go by the board and that media organisations, on the recommendation of business consulting firms, slim down their organisational structure. Here the individualistic ethic should be supplemented by an ethic that takes the system into account. In the framework of an ethic for the media sector, the following authorities must be assigned co-responsibility for the results of journalistic work: the legislature, which shapes the legal basis for the media sector; the media owners, whose interests in economic success can interfere with the journalistic ethic; the editorial hierarchy (all employees inside a media business who, in the context of their jobs, are decision-makers); and the colleagues, among whom the individual journalists work.

It should be noted that employers make their own claims to having three areas of responsibility. These include, firstly, responsibility for the survival of the business, and with that the obligation to provide job security for the employees; secondly, a responsibility for the quality and reliability of the product, as well as, thirdly, a responsibility for the overall social consequences of their work. Another approach to ethics includes the public, too. Thus, Clifford Christians, the American communications scholar, sees "a comprehensive moral duty on the part of the public to watch over societal processes such as social communication." (Christians, 1989). This might be conceivable, for instance, in the case where the public avoids the consumption of inferior media products. Here the public would have to be educated over a long period, in order to direct journalism. Cees Hamelink (1995) sees the beginnings of an ethic for the public in internationally-based initiatives by media consumers to demand from governments and media organisations rights for recipients and safeguards for their interests. Hamelink wants media consumption understood as a social activity involving moral choices. In Germany, Manfred Buchwald, director of Saarland Broadcasting Corporation (1989-1996), referred to this, saying that along with the producers, the public also has a responsibility for the quality of media content.

5. Further aspects of the discussion on a journalistic ethic

As shown in the discussion of the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, empirical studies, with respect to journalistic ethics, are extremely important. Surveys of journalists, for example, can give a picture of journalistic ethics. A survey of German journalists, by Beate Schneider, Klaus Schönbach and Dieter Stürzbecher (1992), showed, for instance, with respect to an evaluation of the legitimacy of controversial research methods that 75% of the journalists polled would use secret government documents; 46% were prepared to pose as an employee in a business or an organisation to access internal information. Nearly 40% would pretend to have opinions
or attitudes other than their own in order to gain the trust of an informant. Nearly 30% of journalists were prepared to procure confidential documents by offering money. Nearly 30% were also prepared to pretend to be someone else to acquire information. As was established in Weaver and Wilhoit’s 1992 study,

American journalists approve of some of these kinds of research methods considerably more frequently. Thus they were considerably more ready to put informants under pressure (49%) and to publish private documents without permission (47%).

A further problem, which impacts the ethical conduct of journalism to different degrees from country to country, concerns the influence of public relations (PR). Especially in Western countries (North America; Western and Central Europe) it is common to want to influence media coverage through PR - and just as much on the part of the state as on the part of business and other associations or interest groups. There is a wide range of PR initiatives. These include, among other things, running press conferences; confidential passing on of information (leaking); the discrediting of possible rivals; the preparation of press kits containing more or less prefabricated articles and pictures; the bribing of journalists [Humbert Wolle (1886 - 1940) wrote: "You cannot hope to bribe or twist, thank God! the British journalist. But, seeing what the man will do unbribed, there's no occasion to." - be it with money, or other gifts (e.g. trips) etc. In every respect, the PR people have the whip hand over the journalists. The former have the time to research the relevant material and to put it together according to their interests.

Furthermore, the PR practitioners know exactly the criteria used to turn information into news. Moreover, the journalists, in every case, are under constant time pressure and therefore tend to be forced to accept public relations output. At the same time, the relationship between PR and journalism does not have to be seen automatically in a negative light, for without the appropriate PR, many issues would not be researched at all. Using PR materials can definitely relieve time constraints faced by journalists. But it is important for journalists to maintain a critical distance from PR output so as to be able to manage the flow of information.

In conclusion, one must refer once again to the basic and self-evident fact that in different countries, different understandings of journalism prevail (e.g. big differences exist in Europe between Germany and Great Britain). It is also important to look at the authority to make the rules within individual media, be they organised by the state, under public law or by the private sector. In other words, it is also a question of internal press freedom - the question as to how far journalists have to take orders from higher ranking people and in which areas they can report independently.
6. Outlook

As late as 1973, the *Handbook of Communications* (Chicago, Rand McNally) appeared, edited by Ithiel de Sola Pool *et al.*, which contained no articles on the topic of the ethics of communication or the ethics of journalism; not once is the term *ethics* to be found in the subject index (at best, the article by Marc A. Franklin, a professor of law, on *Freedom and Control of Communication*, touches upon the ethical dimension). The times when this was possible, in a publication aiming to cover the entire breadth of the communications field, are quite clearly over. The debate around the ethics of journalism will not go away, but, in view of dramatic changes in the media sector, will be even more intensively pursued. The changes concern not only technological developments (e.g. the ability to manipulate images at will; development of new media such as multimedia; the speed at which information is transmitted, etc.), but, above all, the globalisation of the communication sector. Conditional upon changes in American media legislation - especially the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996 - new media giants of previously unimaginable size have come into being in the USA (particularly Time Warner and CNN, as well as Disney and ABC/Capital Cities). The consequence must be that the ethics of journalism can no longer be seen in isolation. It is a matter of the development of a global journalistic ethic, which, in the face of ever spreading commercialisation, is being allowed to combine closely with an ethic of economic activity. In the end, if one wants to avoid regressing to the primitive capitalism of the robber barons, economic activity also requires regulatory norms, which presupposes regular confirmation and feedback through participants in the market. The ethics of related professions, such as public relations, advertising and marketing, also need to be taken into account. Finally, however, it must be a matter of how the self-regulation of journalists - and, related to this, their freedom and ability to criticize in the face of pressure applied by politicians and business, etc. - can be ensured, and this is wrapped up in the ethical debate which is only about ethics at the systemic level, considering the place of the journalist in society.

Incidentally, this collection of essays harks back to important groundwork. In 1989, *Communication ethics and global change* (New York; Longman), edited by Thomas Cooper *et alii*, appeared. This publication emphasised that the quest for truth (also called objectivity or precision) represents the central theme of journalistic ethics. As the second thematic area, Cooper stressed "a desire for responsibility among public communicators." This idea includes wanting to serve a just society, in which equality and respect for privacy prevail. At the same time, reporting should not damage innocent people. Finally, as a third element of professionally ethical journalism, freedom of expression is respected. In his foreword George Gerbner writes: "If ethics is a word that makes journalists squirm, international ethics makes them see red. And not without reasons."
In a book on a more abstract level, Clifford Christians and Michael Traber (eds.) research the question of *Communication ethics and universal values* (Thousand Oaks 1997; Sage). The authors (1997; XI) summarise: "Truth is one underlying principle about which there is cross-cultural agreement. Respect for another person's dignity is a second underlying principle on which various cultures rest." As a third principle of an ethic of communication, "no harm to the innocent" is emphasised (1997, XII). While Christians and Traber were not intending to research the professional ethics of journalism, but rather "to discover a normative vision or a broadly based ethical theory of communication," this reader tries to contribute to the discussion on professional journalism.