

Good
News,

Bad

Journalism
Ethics
and
the
Public
Interest

News
JEREMY IGGERS

Good News, Bad News



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GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS

**Journalism Ethics and
the Public Interest**

Jeremy Iggers

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*To Douglas Lewis,
with gratitude*

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This book has its origins in my doctoral dissertation, written for the philosophy department at the University of Minnesota, and I am especially indebted to the members of my dissertation committee: Michael Root, Gene Mason, Charles Sugnet, Ted Glasser, and my advisor, Doug Lewis.

My own ideas about public journalism and the public responsibilities of journalists developed as a result of having the opportunity to put some of them into practice at the *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis–St. Paul). I have long believed that the best work in ethics comes out of dialogue, and when I wrote ethics columns for the *Star Tribune*, I was eager to find ways to engage readers in dialogue about the issues I explored.

The eventual result was a proposal to create Minnesota's Talking, a statewide network of public issues discussion groups. I am grateful to Linda Picone, former deputy managing editor, for supporting the proposal and giving it the resources it needed to become a reality. I also thank everyone else who contributed to its success: Liz McConnell, who edited the stories; Judy Atrubin, who capably managed the day-to-day operation of the project; and the many other colleagues who contributed time, effort, and expertise. The discussion materials and expertise provided by the Kettering Foundation and the Study Circles Resource Center were invaluable to the project and greatly enriched my own understanding of public deliberation.

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Jeremy Iggers

Introduction

Janet Cooke's Redemption

In the spring of 1996, disgraced *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke resurfaced after years in obscurity. Banished from journalism in 1981 after her Pulitzer Prize-winning story of an eight-year-old inner-city drug addict was revealed as a hoax, Cooke appeared on ABC's *Nightline* with Ted Koppel and asked the American public for forgiveness and a second chance. Koppel heard her confession and then turned to the cameras for his closing summation:

Some of you may wonder why what Janet Cooke did nearly sixteen years ago is still such a big deal to those of us in journalism. Many of you have such a low opinion of us anyway and are so convinced that we twist the facts, ignore the truth, make it up that you may think that we secretly revere Ms. Cooke as a role model.

Lord knows that we have all collectively and individually contributed over the years to that sad impression of what we do. But there must be certain basic standards. What's wrong with American journalism today won't be drastically affected by whether or not Janet Cooke is rehired. What we should do is fire everyone in the business who is as deliberately careless of the truth today as she once was. (Ted Koppel, ABC's *Nightline*, May 10, 1996.)

It was a moment of great drama and solemnity. But is this really what is wrong with American journalism today? Are journalism's problems the fault of individuals within the news media who fail to live up to journalism's basic values? Can journalism's woes be cured by firing everyone who fails to live up to those standards? Or could the problem lie at least in part with the values themselves? Could it be that an increasingly irrelevant conversation within journalism about professional ethics distorts priorities and diverts the attention of both journalists and the public from the

more serious institutional failures of the news media to fulfill their responsibilities?

This book examines the role that journalism ethics play in shaping the direction and priorities of the press. The focus will primarily be on newspapers because it is in newspapers that the battle for American journalism's soul is still being fought.

This is not to suggest that what the reporters and producers at commercial radio and television stations produce is bad or unethical journalism. It is rather to suggest that, for the most part, what they produce isn't journalism at all. Robert MacNeil, former coanchor of the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*, recently summarized the current state of television journalism by proclaiming "the end of news as we know it."

By news as we know it I mean news produced by institutions practicing journalism, more or less observant of standard codes of good journalistic behavior . . . journalism treated if not as a learned profession at least as an honorable and respected craft with an important role to play in the democracy.

I'm pessimistic . . . because all the trends in television journalism are toward the sensational, the hype, the hyperactive, the tabloid values to drive out the serious. In these trends, I see the end of news as a commodity of service to people and its conversion to an amusement, and I'm afraid that the values driving news in that direction will only increase with competition.¹

Network television news has become, in the words of another observer, "a world of UFOs, psychics, daydreams, miracle cures, cuddly animals, O. J. Simpson, JonBenet Ramsey and, from time to time—at least for a few minutes—real news."² In other words, it has become a lot like local news, except that local news may place a higher premium on dramatic scenes of violence. There is little pretense of providing an accurate and comprehensive account of the day's news. The routine operations of local government are almost completely ignored, and when major political events and issues are covered, it is usually without the context that would make them meaningful. Public radio at the national level still produces journalism of a high standard, but its quality and impact at the local level varies with the strength of its local affiliates.

Journalism may be faring better in newspapers than in television, but the difference is only one of degree. Less and less of the content of newspapers is actually news in the traditional sense—information of importance to readers as citizens and members of communities—while an increasing proportion is given over to lifestyle features and information of

interest to readers as consumers—stories about health care, entertainment, or other goods and services.

This much is certain: these are troubled times for American journalism. Publicly held newspaper companies that have traditionally produced an annual return on investment of 20 to 40 percent are under pressure from investors to continue to produce very high profits in spite of greatly increased competition for advertising dollars, fluctuating costs of newsprint, and static or declining readership. This has resulted in tightened budgets, shrinking news holes, and pressure to explore new sources of revenue that sometimes challenge the ethical boundaries of the newsroom.

Newsrooms have also experienced a loss of autonomy as locally owned news operations have been acquired by national chains. The impact of chain ownership on newspapers is debatable; in some cases, the quality of journalism may have improved, but in general, the most notable impact seems to be an increased emphasis on the bottom line. At the same time, television networks have been bought up by larger corporate conglomerates for which journalism is only a subsidiary enterprise.

Inside the profession, discontent mounts. There is a pervasive sense in newsrooms that journalism's best days are over. Real income for most journalists has declined sharply over the past decade, and the intrinsic satisfactions that once compensated for a lower income have diminished as the newsroom environment has been increasingly corporatized. Hard news has been forced to retreat as more and more column space is given over to lifestyle features. "Working for a newspaper used to seem like a noble and exciting calling," concludes Carl Sessions Stepp in the *American Journalism Review*. "Now the business side has triumphed and angst reigns in America's newsrooms."³

At the same time, news operations face a loss of audience. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, viewership of network news programs on CBS, ABC, and NBC declined from 60 percent in 1993 to 48 percent in 1996. Some of that audience has doubtless switched to other news options such as CNN and CNBC, but a comparison of viewership statistics from the 1992 and 1996 elections suggests that the overall audience for news programming has declined. Newspaper readership has suffered a similar decline; according to a 1995 study by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 45 percent of Americans surveyed in March of that year said they had read a newspaper the previous day, compared with 58 percent in 1994 and 71 percent in 1965.⁴ A growing number of Americans have, it seems, simply stopped following the news.

The dailies no longer hold the central place they once held in public life, and many forecasters predict a further decline into irrelevance as the average age of newspaper readers rises and younger information-seekers turn to technologies such as the Internet. A 1996 study predicts that newspaper readership, already in sharp decline, will have lost as much as 14 percent to the Internet between 1996 and the year 2001.⁵

The loss of audience has been accompanied by—and perhaps partly caused by—a loss of credibility and respect. Seventy-one percent of respondents to a 1994 *Times Mirror* survey felt that the media “stand in the way of America solving its problems.” By 1996, that figure had improved to 54 percent, still hardly a vote of confidence.⁶

Moreover, newspapers are experiencing the fallout of a larger crisis in the culture, a period of cultural upheaval that is sometimes described as the end of the modern era. There is a growing acceptance of the idea that reality is socially constructed and that the competing versions of reality presented to us via the news media are not and indeed cannot be unbiased representations of reality. Faith in facts has given way to an understanding that facts don’t interpret themselves and to a distrust of all sources of authority, including newspapers and the experts whose authority they transmit.

The growing popular discontent with the news media has been echoed by a chorus of prominent media critics. Christopher Lasch, James Carey, Jay Rosen, Douglas Kellner, Robert Entman, and others argue that our society faces a crisis of democracy and more broadly a crisis of our social and political institutions. Like many of these critics, Entman, author of *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*, argues that the news media have played a significant role in creating these crises. They have failed to meet their basic public responsibilities and must redefine their public role if we as a society are to resolve the crises.

Recently, James Fallows’s *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* placed the issue of press responsibilities on the best-seller lists. According to Fallows, “Americans have never been truly fond of their press. Through the last decade, however, their disdain for the media establishment has reached new levels. Americans believe that the news media have become too arrogant, cynical, scandal-minded and destructive.”⁷ Unless journalism changes, Fallows warns, it will destroy itself and severely damage American democracy.

Critics on the left charge that the American news media have become (or have always been) “stenographers to power,” carrying out the agenda of ruling elites. Critics on the right accuse the media of having a liberal so-

cial agenda that undermines traditional values. Television journalism in particular has come under attack, accused of distorting public perceptions by dwelling excessively on violent crime.

The growing public hostility toward the press frequently takes the form of demands that journalists live up to the ethical standards of their profession. But the public conception of what those standards are and should be has been largely shaped by the news media themselves.

A closer examination will reveal that the most fundamental problem is not the performance of journalists but the standards themselves. It is quite possible to be a very ethical journalist, relative to the ethical norms that circulate within the profession, and yet to produce journalism that is ineffectual, meaningless, or even irresponsible and destructive, when examined in the light of a broader conception of the ethical responsibilities of the news media.

This irony may explain the widespread cynicism of journalists about the nature of their enterprise and about the role of ethics in journalism. This cynicism is rooted in the profound contradiction between the stated mission of the press, which is to provide citizens with the information they need to play an active role in democratic life, and the reality of daily practice, which systematically compromises values of public service in favor of other interests. Rules theoretically designed to safeguard the stated mission of the press instead frequently serve to legitimate practices that undermine that mission.

The loss of connection and trust between the public and the news media is costly to both citizens and journalists. For citizens, the news media are an important gateway connecting them to their government, their communities, and each other. Journalists need the public even more than the public needs journalism. "It is not only the economy of the newspaper that is at stake when readers turn away," argue Professor Jay Rosen of New York University, a founder of the public journalism movement, and Davis "Buzz" Merritt Jr., senior editor of the *Wichita Eagle*. "It is the foundation of journalism as a public practice. This foundation—a common interest in common affairs—cannot be secured simply by improving the presentation of news, or attending more carefully to what busy readers want. For unless readers also want to be citizens, journalism cannot meet its public responsibilities."⁸

Newspapers will probably survive in some form. The question is whether journalism will survive. When the trends of declining readership, eroding economic base, and the diminishing force of citizenship as a public value are

projected out into the future, there is little reason for optimism that the mass-circulation urban newspaper of the future will be any more hospitable to serious journalism than the local television newscast of today.

Are Journalists Listening?

Although much public criticism of the press is now focused on journalism's impact on our democratic institutions and societal values, journalism's institutional conversation about ethics largely ignores these issues. When the three leading figures of journalism's "ethics establishment"—Jay Black, then at the University of Alabama, Bob Steele, of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, and Ralph Barney, of Brigham Young University—came together in 1993 to create a handbook of journalism ethics, the issues they chose to focus on were largely the same ones that have dominated the institutional conversation for decades: accuracy and fairness, conflicts of interest, deception, plagiarism, and source/reporter relationships.⁹ And when the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ; formerly Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi, or SPJ/SDX) convened in 1996 to revise their code of ethics, they followed the same pattern. Why have these issues, and not those raised by the aforementioned critics, come to dominate the journalism's "official" conversation about ethics?

It might be suggested that this question fuses together two different sets of issues: the matters of daily conduct that concern the ethics establishment and the larger issues of the public responsibilities of the press that concern media critics. But the two sets of issues cannot be so easily separated. The purpose of the rules that govern daily conduct is supposedly to ensure that the press fulfills its public mission. Koppel's remarks suggest that by defining "what's wrong with American journalism today" in terms of individual misconduct, journalism is able to preempt a conversation about the more serious institutional failure.

Journalism's dysfunctional conversation about ethics is at least a contributing cause of its institutional decline. By focusing on the wrong issues, it becomes less able to resist the most serious threats to its vitality and independence or to muster public support.

Taking a Closer Look

The case of Janet Cooke, modern journalism's most famous instance of journalistic misconduct, sheds a great deal of light on how journalism's in-

stitutional conversation about ethics operates. Why did this case achieve such singular notoriety? Surely, to choose one example, the failure of the news media to uncover and report the Savings and Loan scandal, described by former *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ellen Hume as “the most expensive public finance debacle in U.S. history,”¹⁰ ranks as a more important ethical issue for journalism than the fictionalizing of a junior *Washington Post* reporter. Why does journalism’s internal conversation about ethics focus on Janet Cooke and similar cases while ignoring larger, more systematic shortcomings?

The status of this case cannot really be explained as simply the result of the straightforward application of worthy formal principles. Rather, those principles and rules of conduct are components of a complex system shaped by the institutional interests of the news media and by relations of power within the media. The attention the Cooke case has garnered raises a number of important questions:

- What relationship is there between the principles of ethics expressed in codes of ethics and the rules that govern actual conduct?
- What considerations other than the stated principles help to determine the kinds of cases that get “problematized”—that is, treated as unethical?
- Who decides what the ethical rules are?
- What are the mechanisms by which these values are circulated?
- Who has the authority to determine when an ethical rule has been violated and to decide what sort of sanctions may be imposed?

Answers to these questions help us to understand how journalism ethics, understood as a system of shared values and social practices, operates. But to fully understand the notoriety of the Janet Cooke case, we need to understand not only the rules of journalism’s ethical “language game,” but also the historical context within which the case arose. What emerges is a picture of journalism ethics as a dysfunctional ethical discourse. That raises a larger question: what kind of conversation about ethics does journalism need, and what conditions must be present for such a conversation to be possible? Answering that question is the focus of this book.

The Organization of the Book

We begin with one basic given: Journalism is in trouble. In the face of declining public respect and interest, journalists are often urged to be more