The morals that shape the news

A study of Aotearoa New Zealand's newsrooms

Abstract: This article explores the personal interpretation of the moral world Aotearoa New Zealand newsroom leaders are guided by when shaping the news, or, in other words, it poses the question: Do personal moral values play a role in Aotearoa New Zealand newsroom? This study examines whether newsroom leaders view morals as a driver in news-shaping, or whether the news values of objectivity, accuracy and fairness prevail over personal morals when it comes to informing the news. The research was conducted by interviewing six newsroom leaders from different media companies in Aotearoa New Zealand and the interview data were analysed within a theoretical and philosophical framework adopted from Lakoff (2002). The research suggests that working professionals in the media industry were not able to discern where their morals ended and where professional news values started. Interviewees affiliated with public service media said that upholding moral values would not have a financial impact on the news media organisation, whereas those affiliated with private media responded that it would.

Keywords: code of ethics, balance, fairness, journalism, journalistic field, liberal political philosophy, moral values, newsroom leader, New Zealand, objectivity

FEDERICO MAGRIN
Journalist, Stuff

Introduction

THIS RESEARCH posits that newsroom leaders hold personal moral values while being professional journalists. In this study, we employ an idiosyncratic definition of moral values, as interpretations of the subjective power of judgment that have their origin in the individual passions and sentiments of the authentic personality, as well as empirical, material creations of the principles of external education. Therefore, it is argued that subjective moral values have the power to cloud the striving for objectivity, as the illusion of participating in objectivity is designed by the individual self, which seeks to validate its aims. (Kant, 1788/2001, 1790/2000; Nietzsche, 1887/1974, 1901/1968).

Hence, as people who carry moral values, journalists have 'second-order-desires' or 'desires of the second order'—which means that they perform 'reflective self-evaluation' and limit the power of the will (Frankfurt, 1971, pp. 6-7). They desire what they want to desire. These moral actions, performed by the power to desire, can either obstruct the path to objectivity—a professional aim within journalism (Schudson, 2001, 2018)—or pave it. Morals, modes of reason and systems of meaning inform the decision-making process of journalists. Paraphrasing the distinction Kant made between the private and the public[1] use of reason (Donald, 2003), it could be said that journalists try to avoid applying personal values while shaping the news, because they are within their professional space. In order to maintain a professional habitus (Schultz, 2007; Vos, 2016), the personal upbringing and the moral values newsroom leaders bring to the newsrooms have to be harnessed in a professional way. Notwithstanding this noble intention, editors, heads of news, and CEOs might still apply their own moral values when in a work environment.

This study seeks to assess whether in Aotearoa New Zealand journalists from traditional media organisations have a moral position in the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 2005; Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019); whether they express their beliefs in a professional environment; and whether subjective moral propositions determine and inform their journalistic practices.

The research follows an approach based on Bourdieu's topological interpretation of the field theory (Chew & Tandoc Jr, 2022); his conceptualisation of doxa, which will be understood as implicit and explicit rules assumed by actors within the journalistic field (Vos, 2016, p. 386); and his conclusion that the moral position in the field determines and informs expressions of belief and moral propositions (Bourdieu, 1988). We will also use research by scholars pointing out how objectivity remains one of the most valued journalistic epistemologies; the epistemology interpreting objectivity as a journalistic claim; that there is an 'objective truth' and that one 'can and should separate facts from values' (Hanitzsch et al., 2011, p. 276).

Methodology

Following the methodological steps of Rupar (2020), this article will examine whether heads of news and executive managers in six newsrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive the newsroom as a moral space. It investigates the experience of seasoned journalists within a professional space and asks them to look into the deep structure of morality. The study is based on interviews with six newsroom leaders of news media organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand: Stuff, NZME, MediaWorks, *The Platform*, Radio NZ and *Te Ao Māori News*. Participants were identified via social media network according to their job title (LinkedIn), contacted on their professional email addresses and then interviewed online. In a small country such as Aotearoa, the selection was by

necessity both random (decided by the participants' willingness to answer), as well as designed—both by accident and by design. The mix of mainstream legacy media, indigenous public broadcaster and small start-up, conservative and liberal news outlets was used to portray the diversified and changing media landscape in the country.

The interviewing approach echoes previously established conventions (Usher, 2017). The interviews were recorded and processed using an Artificial Intelligence software widespread among journalists: otter.ai (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2023). The software produced transcripts of the interviews, which were then verified for accuracy against the audio recordings.

Participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire, which helped to clarify the terminology, understand motivations and expectations, explore moral perceptions and identify how journalists engaged with moral values in the newsroom. In order to introduce the participants to a map of moral values, they were asked to list how important the following moral values were in the line of their work: equality, discipline, freedom, fairness, virtue, individual responsibility, authority and justice. The morals for the list had previously been selected from philosophical and sociological literature (Fukuyama, 1992; Lakoff, 2002; Perry, 2011; Rawls, 2001). The interviews were interpreted within the political-theoretical framework developed by Lakoff (2002).

After elaborating and analysing the contents of the interviews, several themes were identified and reviewed. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles of Thematic Analysis, recurring themes were used to group information and present data. Four separate themes were identified: newsrooms as moral spaces; two interpretations of fairness; freedom of speech and individual responsibility; and the (perceived) financial outcomes of having personal, moral values.

This research project has received the approval of Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Newsrooms as moral spaces

The Colombian philosopher Gómez Dávila (1977/2020) described moral conscience as a faculty whose active decisions solely operated at a subaltern level. Decisions taken consciously, as a result, did not appear to count on a moral level—or at least did not seem to count on a macro-moral level. However, subconscious decisions, or choices made by the deep structure of morality, operate on a macro-level. The deep structure of morality is a byproduct of the freedom of the will, acting merely on its own freedom, and of the moral upbringing received by the ethos of the family, small sub-societal groups and society.

Newsroom leaders across different companies pointed out how the workplace could be represented as a moral space; because, within the professional environment, what they called a shared morality would require a certain set of

behaviours, conventional language choices and moral bounds. As Lakoff (2002) observed, 'word choice and discourse forms' (p. 28) could be formulated as a result of moral concepts and ideals, working on a sub-linguistic level. Besides the role played by commercial codes of ethics (MacNamara, 2016) and shared news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Ross, 2019; Schudson, 2013), linguistic automatisms established by these professional values censored the interviewees and their moral practice.

The NZME newsroom leader argued that there were two different systems of morality at play in a newsroom: a system of 'shared morality', that would serve the audience; and personal views. The shared morality was a hybrid mix of journalistic news values and the company's code of ethics. Every journalist, they said, should be 'partaking in the wider morality of an organisation.' They spoke about occasional clashes between these two different sets of values, where the personal values could conflict with the professional ones—although that has never occurred to them. These instances were described as 'an occasion where I would feel that something was wrong, but I had to do it anyway.' Donald (2003) defined a private, or 'corporate' sphere, as a place 'where enforced conformity is not only legitimate but beneficial' (p. 51). Therefore, if newsroom leaders were to abide by professional values, they would benefit from obeying. A concept that the newsroom leader from RNZ reinforced by saying that journalists did not consciously think about morality or morals in their everyday life. The allegiance to professional values acted on a subconscious level, triggering moral acts: 'I just do what I feel I need to do to get the job done' (Newsroom leader, RNZ).

The newsroom leaders across different companies thought that a personal sense of morality (Guyer, 2006), a view on what was right and what was wrong, played a role in the decision-making process. The discrepancy between the personal moral values and the ethical values of the journalistic field—called professional, organisational, or journalistic values—would often see the latter prevail over the former. Thus, journalistic actors have embraced 'the assumptions of the [journalistic] field'—the newsroom leaders have assumed what Bourdieu and others call doxa (Vos, 2016, p. 386). Belonging to a specific field as an active member results in the adoption of a whole 'system of presuppositions' (Bourdieu, 2005). In the case of the journalistic field, these were the news values.

Nonetheless, the newsroom leader from Stuff affirmed that it was 'important that journalists and newsroom leaders have a strong set of principles and values that they use'. They said both these moral systems—professional and personal—would play a role in shaping the news, but at times journalists were unable to distinguish what was appropriate according to the standard codes of ethics (journalistic values) and their own sense of morality: 'I would also like to think they [journalistic values] are my own personal values, but which ones influence which?' (Newsroom leader, Stuff).

After establishing a career in journalism, journalists might end up binding together professional ethical values and subjective moral values, or even incorporating the former into their own moral understanding. Somehow, this feature would be a bridging point between Western journalism and Talanoa journalism (Robie, 2019). While Pacific journalism and a Pacific approach to journalism will not be discussed per se, it is worth mentioning that when journalists start incorporating subjective moral values into their professional practice, journalism might have the potential to become a more reflexive and nuanced field—where a commitment to the ideal freedom of the media could mix with community ethics and social responsibility, where recognition of cultural values could espouse normative ethical codes.

During the interviews, a number of moral values were named as being relevant, or of paramount importance, to the job of a newsroom leader: honesty, fairness, freedom, individual responsibility and truth. Before the moral values can be examined and distinguished according to the individual position of the interviewees in relation to their individual moral system, a distinction between two different definitions of fairness must be put forward.

Justice as fairness versus fairness as neutrality

Fairness as a news value is one of the most common professional values among journalists and it is thought to be a requirement to attain neutrality, objectivity and credibility (Deuze, 2005). This news value suggests that the 'strict adherence to impartiality and neutrality belong to the highly esteemed professional standards of journalism', according to Hanitzsch at al. (2011, pp. 286-87). On the other hand, fairness is at the centre of a liberal political philosophy formulated in 1971 (Rawls, 2005). Rawls (2001) has put the moral concept at the very centre of his pluralist interpretation of liberalism—and he has been defined as one of the major exponents of political liberalism (Lakoff, 2002). The Rawlsian interpretation of fairness is at the core of an extensive system of political philosophy that values equality of opportunities above anything else.

Fairness as a requirement to attain neutrality in reporting shares the same inclination towards equality. Most of the newsroom leaders defined equality, or fairness, as the most important morals for them. The RNZ newsroom leader defined fairness as the only lens that was applicable in the process of news-shaping and the only value that would not compromise journalists' integrity—because 'everything else flows from fairness'. They expanded their view by saying morals in journalism should not be performative, which translates into a mere constative interpretation of journalism. Constative journalism is 'a sentiment expressed by public service journalists' (Harrison, 2019, p. 4). According to Hanitzsch et al. (2011), detachment, as a means to attain neutrality, was one of the most esteemed 'traditional Western' ideals among journalists (p. 280).

Although different, the two meanings of fairness share some similarities. In reporting, fairness is often used as a synonym for objectivity (Deuze, 2005) and it is used in news reporting to balance the presented views. This usually means offering the public an equal possibility to hear from diverging views or giving dissimilar opinions an equal opportunity to be represented. Therefore, fairness in reporting is imbued with the concept of equality. During the interview with the NZME newsroom leader, this confusion between the two differing meanings of the moral concept was formulated as follows: people might join a news media organisation because they abide by professional ethical values, before joining the industry. Moreover, they praised journalists as they have no hidden agenda and because they are 'truthful and fair': 'I think they [journalists] are some of the most ethical people that you can work with' (newsroom leader, NZME).

The fine line that separates personal from professional values was usually thinned by a career: if a person was motivated by their morals to pursue a profession and join the news media industry, then, after a career in journalism, the codes of ethics would have replaced those moral values. This shared perspective among the newsroom leaders on the slight distinction between news values and moral values would often lead journalists to understand fairness as a professional value, even though it was morally charged. The newsroom leader from Stuff defined the company's code of ethics as the 'moral values' of the news media organisation:

> [The code of ethics] is almost like an organisation's expression of our collective moral values, you know, the ones that we think are fundamentals. If I think about the opposite, if I think about companies that I think do not have moral values—the ones that come to my mind, like Facebook, for example, which I would describe as morally bankrupt, because they, over many years, have become a platform where massacres can be live streamed, where hate speech can flourish, where vicious attacks can be plotted and planned, where people can be, you know, brainwashed by deliberate disinformation, you know, people are allowed to use the platform for really malign purposes—it's interesting to think that having that approach has obviously helped build them into a super successful financial company. (Newsroom leader, Stuff)

Across the legacy media industry (Lotz, 2018) in Aotearoa New Zealand, fairness was deemed a universal value by the newsroom leaders. Two newsroom leaders pointed out that the 'epitome of fairness' was represented by the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17) and also quoted the Gospel injunction: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' (Matthew 7:12) These two newsroom leaders highlighted how their Catholic upbringing had underpinned the moral values they would have as adults. Although different interpretations

of the same moral values might exist, they believed every human being had the same set of moral values. Regardless of their religious affiliation or personal credo, the Judaeo-Christian morals were deemed to be shared universally.

As shown by Hanitzsch et al. (2011), Western journalists are often under the illusion of strictly adhering to universal ethical principles and rules. The belief in some sort of universalism was part of the liberal modern state and reinforced by the liberal media actors' doxa. But its roots were planted in a religious creed. The belief in the universality of a moral value found its roots within Judaeo-Christian morality. The liberal premise of universalism flourished when Christianity attempted to establish a common, universal human history and was only then reinforced by liberal democracies (Fukuyama, 1992).

Religious upbringing might have played a part in creating the belief in universalistic features of moral values and perhaps even in the 'cross-over' between moral values and professional standards. A common, universal moral ground was thought to be shared by every human being. This universalism would entail a common understanding of professional standards. The differing interpretations of a moral value such as freedom, the Stuff newsroom leader said, would not translate into the abandonment of the value.

Freedom of speech and individual responsibility

When asked about the most important moral value, the newsroom leader from The Platform said freedom came to the very fore, if compared with equality or fairness. Freedom was a condition for fairness. The principle of freedom of speech and expression would let people who had been criticised have a right to reply, which was what fairness in reporting entailed. Freedom was to be interpreted as a contestatory, or an oppositional right, which is a value that would let citizens contest and resist authorities (Pettit, 1999).

As part of the latest World Values Survey (Perry 2011; Perry & Yeung, 2021), a survey on values carried out between different countries over several decades using questionnaires, freedom and equality were measured against each other, and the respondents were asked whether they favoured freedom over equality, or vice versa. Following the theoretical framework provided by Lakoff (2002), equality is placed inside a liberal system of morality, and freedom in a conservative one.

The contrast between the two moral values was mentioned during the interviews with newsroom leaders and most of them ended up stressing more the concept of equality rather than freedom. The newsroom leader from Stuff highlighted the relevance of freedom, but said freedom of expression and fairness—'the very core basics' of journalism—should not be swayed by 'strong' personal interpretations: 'the objectivity of journalism' must not be tainted by personal bias. The newsroom leader from Stuff referred to people who advocated for non-interference from the government, specifically in terms of safety policies relating

to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., governmental mandates). People who believe in what Pettit (2014) called a republican conception of freedom, that is freedom as non-domination, or freedom as non-interference, might then be perceived as a menace. This liberal interpretation of freedom is a legacy of the Lockean idea that everyone should be tolerated but the intolerants; a concept that was summarised by Gómez Dávila (1977/2020, p. 121): 'We must avoid the bigotry of respecting inconsiderate opinions.'[2] The reactionary thinker would affirm that concrete freedom rather than abstract freedom should be defended from the despotism of ideology (Gómez Dávila, 1986/2022).

On the other hand, the newsroom leader from The Platform stressed the perilous consequences of abandoning a staunch defence of freedom of expression and speech, tout-court. Since the legacy media organisations were dismissing these 'fundamentals', the 'idea of a democratic free society' was at stake. Traditional media organisations were causing a 'lack of diversity' and a 'lack of tolerance', and creating a 'sameness' in the news:

> [News media] is creating, in some ways, a sameness and a lack of diversity in its views, and in the views, it's prepared to entertain. [And] a lack of tolerance. (Newsroom leader, *The Platform*)

Following Lakoff's (2002) theoretical framework, this idea was interpreted as supporting a conservative interpretation of morals. Behind word choice and discourse preferences, a sense of morality is laid. Matheson (2005, p. 27) stated that 'words mean much more than dictionaries have tended to suggest, bringing with them quite specific cultural knowledge and expectations along with the conditions of their use.' Language is practical not because it conveys moral acts, but in the sense that linguistic acts show conducts of life and morals. Therefore, language has to be interpreted in relation to a moral system.

According to the newsroom leader from *Te Ao Māori News*, when not embracing individual responsibility, media actors will not reach the necessary threshold to practise other moral values. Then, individual responsibility is to be preserved within Aotearoa New Zealand media landscape, as non-Māori need to be held accountable for the misrepresentations and errors of the past. As a result of a convention in the dominant Pākehā group, the newsroom leader from *Te Ao Māori News* said Māori media had to apply an equity lens when shaping the news. This was an active practice that counterbalanced 'the function of mainstream media', which in the past had dismissed Māori concerns (Hodgetts et al., 2005, p. 193). Thus, Māori media represented a significant alternative to previous media coverage that focused on the interest of the dominant group—the Pākehā perspective. Archie (2019) claimed this position in Māori reporting was inclusive journalism:

> Otherwise, you are regurgitating what non-Māori media present to the world. Sometimes I see our role as balancing what Pākehā media will present. (Newsroom leader, *Te Ao Māori News*)

As an organisation, Te Ao Māori News has a moral obligation to present the Māori perspective and correct unbalanced representation of Māori people. The self-representation of a minority, indigenous group could increase the presence of a marginalised group and community in mainstream media (Hodgetts et al., 2005). *The Te Ao Māori News* newsroom leader felt a duty to represent the interests of a minority audience, which is a prominent feature of public service news media (Cushion, 2012). The role of the Fourth Estate in disclosing the invisible, which was not previously seen or heard, played a major role in a news media organisation focused on a 'tribal, regional and indigenous viewpoint.' Or, as the newsroom leader from *Te Ao Māori News* puts it: Māori media espoused different values and assumed a cultural viewpoint that would then influence the collection, presentation and distribution of news. However, this raised the question of whether espousing a cause or favouring a specific cultural milieu could have a financial cost for news media organisations.

Having moral values: a (perceived) financial outcome

The old saying goes 'everything comes at a price', but would upholding moral values have a financial cost too? Could personal moral values be an economic burden for news media organisations? Could morals benefit media actors?

Instructed to rely exclusively on their perception, the interviewees were asked whether upholding a certain personal moral perspective could have a financial outcome for their company. Most of the newsroom leaders highlighted how they were free from any ties from the commercial, advertising or marketing departments. The sense of autonomy was justified by the audience being their primary asset. According to Cushion (2012), editorial autonomy is a requisite for the pluralist media landscape. The perception of autonomy is widespread among commercial media and public service media (Harrison, 2019). Public service journalism, the newsroom leader from RNZ said, was independent and as such would not 'have to worry about keeping clients happy.' The newsroom leader from MediaWorks pointed out that even though having a 'moral backbone' could have a cost in terms of audiences, it was nonetheless vital for the news media industry:

> Having a moral- and value-based backbone is not just critical for driving advertising revenue, it's critical for the survival of the industry. I don't think it would survive otherwise. (Newsroom leader, MediaWorks)

Others perceived that having a moral perspective came with a financial cost. The *Te Ao Māori News* newsroom leader portrayed a financial situation where

there was a lack of investment in Māori-speaking journalists and technology experts, as well as an inequity in the distribution of governmental funding. Māori-focused news media were perceived to be disadvantaged as the field was not level.

Hence, the newsroom leaders from different media organisations stated that their role as media organisations was more important than whatever financial outcome upholding moral values could trigger. Whether it was pursuing the representation of the interests of a minority, or defending an idea of society, moral values were put first and financial considerations always came second.

Conclusion

Moral values play an important role in newsrooms, whether they are professional codes of ethics, moral products of a personal upbringing, or shared morality systems. Newsroom leaders across Aotearoa New Zealand identified the challenge of distinguishing their own morals from the professional codes of conduct—at times, they were unable to distinguish where one ended and the other began, as borders between morality systems became blurred.

Shared morality, a system of principles and behaviours shared within the corporate space, was also the focus of journalists who had been in the media industry for a long time. The allegiance to corporate values was thought to be ethical and morality was not a major concern when 'on the job.' Paraphrasing a distinction made between the public and the private use of reason (Donald, 2003), newsroom leaders put into practice a private use of morals in the corporate space—and obedience to the company's code of ethics was deemed beneficial.

Media agents occupied a moral position within the journalistic field and these 'position-takings' were either conservative or transformative of the field (Bourdieu, 2005). Newsroom leaders from liberal or public service media organisations tended to espouse and defend equality and fairness; whereas conservative agents were more inclined to denounce the decline in freedom of speech and expression. As freedom, equality and fairness are all news values, that is to say, professional values—it could be inferred that news-values are the doxa of the journalistic field.

Finally, the interviewees perceived that upholding moral values might or might not have an impact on the financial side of the news media organisations. Public service journalists were not inclined to perceive morals as having a role in the financial gain or loss of the company, whereas the private media ones highlighted their commitment to having a 'moral backbone'. The respondents always stated their moral values came first when compared with the financial benefit of the company. On one occasion, the newsroom leader pointed out how representing the interests of a minority (Māori) took a financial toll on their company.

The findings of this study pointed out that newsroom leaders in Aotearoa New

Zealand act within the journalistic field upholding personal moral values. The persistence of morals and their application while on the job was present beyond the need to feel the representation of an issue, or 'the commitments to agreed-upon codes of ethics and editorial guidelines' (Hanitzsch et al., 2011, p. 276).

This research encountered several limitations. Prospective participants were easy to reach, but at times reluctant to undergo the interviewing or unwilling to answer to a request to participate. The qualitative collection of data did not allow the author to amass interviews with many participants, although the quality of the interviews with the six recruited participants allowed for rich and intelligible data.

Future research should extend the pool of interviewees; not only to better portray a more comprehensive picture of Aotearoa New Zealand's newsrooms by extending the qualitatively collected data, but also to depict a more pluralistic account of the many news outlets of the country: the emerging online-only websites as much as the old-fashioned community newspapers. Furthermore, according to the author's experience, in the future, where practicable, interviews should be carried over several encounters face-to-face with the interviewees in their workplace. Finally, the research into the role of moral values should be further extended into new media. Online platform leaders involved in sharing the news (Google, Facebook, Microsoft) might have their groundworks investigated, as they are responsible for the sharing of information to a wider public.

Notes

1. Following Habermas' concept of public sphere: a personal opinion was vented freely only in the public sphere, where the social, governmental and professional constraints do not apply (Habermas, 1964).
2. Translation provided by the author.

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Federico Magrin is an Italian-born journalist, essayist and philosopher, currently working in Aotearoa New Zealand.
magrinfederico93@gmail.com