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# THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO JOURNALISM ETHICS

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**Edited by**  
**Lada Trifonova Price, Karen Sanders,**  
**and Wendy N. Wyatt**

First published 2022

ISBN: 9780367206475 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032041599 (pbk)

ISBN: 9780429262708 (ebk)

## Chapter 45

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### JOURNALISM ETHICS AND ITS PARTICIPATORY TURN

*Tobias Eberwein*

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Funder: CMC Institute, Austrian Academy of Sciences

DOI: 10.4324/9780429262708-51

# JOURNALISM ETHICS AND ITS PARTICIPATORY TURN

*Tobias Eberwein*

## Introduction

In the digitized journalistic ecosystems of today, the traditional distinction between producer and user has become obsolete. Thanks to the innovations of the Web 2.0 (and platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter), everybody now has the opportunity to be a “produser” (Bruns, 2008) and publish media content without being restricted by the conventional control mechanisms found in professional newsrooms. Even the comment function on the websites of traditional news media is a new participatory channel that enhances the scope of journalistic communication (Barnes, 2018). From the start, this trend toward *produsage* was greeted with enthusiasm among many media practitioners and researchers, who often claimed that participatory forms of content production may help to increase the quality of journalism – for example by raising awareness of neglected topics or mistakes in the coverage (Heikkilä et al., 2012). To date, however, these high hopes have mostly evaporated. Practical experience has shown that user participation does not automatically lead to better journalism but may have many dysfunctional effects (such as hate speech and trolling) and, thus, turn into a challenge for the profession.

The current discourse about the ethics of journalism in the digital age has not yet managed to provide much help in this context: Parallel to the new creative potential of participatory journalism, the traditional analytical categories of journalism ethics, which have long relied on the distinction between producer and user, are starting to blur. This development not only complicates the attribution of responsibility in cases of conflict, but also questions the concept of professional ethics in general. Recurring problems in newsrooms around the globe seem to commend that a broader ethic of *produsage*, which would in various ways be independent from the professional norms and values of traditional journalism, would offer more helpful guidance in today’s digital media world. But how can such an ethic be construed and win the endorsement of all the relevant actors in participatory communication settings? Which are the specific challenges it needs to address? And how can it provide practical solutions in the process of countering these challenges?

This chapter discusses these and similar questions on the basis of a multi-part qualitative empirical study. Beginning in 2015, the author conducted a series of qualitative interviews with (European) online journalists, media users, and experts of media self-regulation; these

interviews were a first step toward the aim of identifying and structuring the ethical problems of user participation in journalism. After a brief discussion of the relevant conceptual background, the chapter presents selected results from the interviews in more detail. The outcomes may be regarded as a useful starting point for an outline of the future tasks and challenges for the ethics of participatory journalism.

## Conceptual background

In the history of journalism ethics, various – and often contradictory – approaches to normative thinking have been considered in order to define what is good journalism (Ward, 2004). Individual ethical perspectives, for example, often compete with institutional or professional justifications of journalistic standards. On the other hand, the audience has long been underrepresented as a point of reference (Hamelink, 1995). The cause of this situation lies, as Rath (2016) suggests, in the evolution of mass communication theory: In traditional mass media, communication was usually understood as a one-way process, in which a communicator distributed media content to a passive and unspecified group of recipients. While this “dispersed audience” (Maletzke, 1963, p. 23) remained a mere object, responsibility was only attributed to the producers – and if need be, to the distributors – of journalistic offerings.

Such a one-sided understanding of mass communication, of course, has often been criticized. Christians (1988), for example, dismisses the notion of a passive audience by stressing its “collective responsibility” for the media – and media usage, in particular. This view follows the assumption that journalists only produce the kind of media content the audience wants to consume – an automatism that users can bypass by refusing all content that is ethically offensive. Funiok (2007) identifies at least three different areas of responsibility for audiences: (1) the individual responsibility of audience members for themselves and their own media usage; (2) their co-responsibility as citizens for democratic institutions and, thus, also the media; (3) their educational co-responsibility for the media literacy of children and adolescents. However, because audiences are hardly ever organized systematically, these subareas of the ethics of the audience are seldom substantiated or even codified: With the exception of the protection of minors in the media (for example, in the case of standardized age-rating systems for TV broadcasts or movies), specific guidelines or legal control mechanisms are rare.

At the same time, as shown by Fengler, Eberwein, Mazzoleni, Porlezza, and Russ-Mohl (2014), the number of critical statements that media users make over various online channels (for example, comment sections on journalistic news sites, social media platforms, and specialized media watch blogs) have been ever more frequent. These statements highlight mistakes as well as hold media actors accountable and are a clear sign of the desire of the audience to participate actively in the ethical discourse about journalism. Previous analyses of the ethics of digital journalism have demonstrated that the current media transformation not only changes the instruments of quality management in the newsroom, but also the journalistic norms and values *per se*. For example, Singer (2010) points out that many normative discussions about the future of the profession postulate a shift from “gatekeeper ethics” toward a novel kind of “relational ethics”. According to this notion, the traditional self-concept of the journalist as a gatekeeper, whose key task it is to select the news that is fit for publication, is becoming less powerful in the digital media world. In order to live up to the expectations of networked publics, media actors are required to enter into dialogues with their users. This transition from a one-sided news production process to the feedback of an active audience implies hitherto unknown possibilities for media users to contribute to the conventional mechanisms of media self-regulation (traditionally driven by organizations

such as press councils, ombudspeople, trade journals, etc.) and advance them into a new type of participatory media regulation (Eberwein, Leppik-Bork & Lönnendonker, 2013).

Of course, this trend calls for a re-focusing of the traditional ethical discourses about the media audience, a participatory turn that would imply letting go of the paternalistic ethics designed to protect passive media users and conceptualizes media users as active producers on an equal footing with other media actors. Ethics of produsage, as yet undefined, would make it necessary to establish a new core value of reciprocity, which could be accepted alongside traditional principles such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and accountability. With their acknowledgment of the importance of reciprocity and dialogue as key characteristics of moral reasoning in the postmodern age, several ethical concepts offer interesting food for thought. The notion of relationship ethics, for example, has been applied to the most varied social fields of action such as the areas of couples and familial relationships (Hicks & Cornille, 1999), of health care (Warren, 1989), and of contemporary business life (Hartman, 2005). Contrary to other branches of applied philosophy, this ethics sub-discipline draws on the interrelations between human subjects as a starting point for moral orientation, while other criteria become less relevant. A more direct influence on the practice of journalism is detectable in approaches informed by communitarian ethics (Christians, Ferré & Fackler, 1993) and the ethics of care (Steiner & Okrusch, 2006). While the former stress the communal good and the social nature of humans, the latter view the promotion of care as an essential trait of human togetherness and, thus, try to endorse civility and thoughtfulness in the journalistic treatment of, for instance, sources or story subjects (Ward, 2009).

Although all these approaches promise valuable insights, a systematic integration into the debate about the ethics of produsage is still needed. So, while the necessity of a participatory turn in journalism ethics seems to be self-evident, its elaboration remains largely vague. This awareness served as a catalyst for the empirical studies that are summarized in the following sections of this chapter.

### **Empirical spotlights**

In order to illuminate the parameters of participatory journalism ethics, the author interviewed 91 people over three waves using a problem-centered approach (Witzel, 2000). Most of the interviews occurred between 2015 and 2017. Wave one included online journalists in traditional newsrooms as well as experts from the realm of media self-regulation; wave two focused on the field of citizen journalism; and wave three concentrated on the perspectives of media users that regularly comment on journalistic publications. The interviews were carried out face-to-face, via telephone, or via Skype and in all cases with the help of semi-standardized field manuals that were intended to pre-structure the relevant issues of the analysis. The conversations were recorded and transcribed in full to enable qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014).

#### ***Wave one: challenges from the perspective of traditional newsrooms***

The first wave of the interview series focused on the perspectives of online journalists in the newsrooms of traditional newspaper and broadcasting companies in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This part of the study was designed to illuminate the most pressing ethical issues in the digital media world, systematize them, and evaluate the journalists' needs and expectations with regard to normative guidance, for example by institutions of media self-regulation (Eberwein, Porlezza, Bichler & Karmasin, 2016; Porlezza & Eberwein, forthcoming).

The interviews leave no doubt that the field of professional ethics is currently in a state of change due to the far-reaching digitization of journalistic work processes. Online journalists are confronted with a broad range of new ethical challenges, some of which have long been unknown in analog newsrooms and are by no means limited to the implications of participatory communication. According to the empirical study, the most conspicuous are:

- the increasing requirements of journalistic accuracy, particularly in the context of internet searches and links to external online content;
- the necessity of new obligations for newsroom transparency, ranging, for example, from handling errors to pursuing open access strategies in connection with data journalism;
- new difficulties with the separation of editorial content and advertising, for instance in native advertising strategies (see Chapter 44 of this volume by Ferrer-Conill, Karlsson, and Van Couvering);
- problems of digital long-term archives, above all in the context of a “right to be forgotten” (see Chapter 42 in this volume by Azurmendi);
- problems with the moderation of user comments and other forms of user-generated content;
- challenges resulting from the use of social media as a research tool, a source for raw data, and a distribution channel;
- questions about an ethic of algorithms, for example in the context of automated journalism (see Chapter 36 in this volume by Salaverria and Chapter 37 by Bartzen Culver and Minochet).

Even though the momentum of a participatory turn in journalism ethics may only come to the fore in some of the highlighted concerns, the consequences seem to be particularly bothersome for newsroom actors: Obviously, user participation is still an odd phenomenon for many journalists. While many of them entered the profession with a – more or less – clear understanding of traditional “gatekeeper ethics”, they feel that dialogic qualities are becoming more important now in all phases of news production, from information collection to the often challenging follow-up communication in comment sections and via social media.

Many interviewees noted that the established instruments of media self-regulation offer little help in this regard. The prevailing professional codes of ethics have been adapted only partially and still make hardly any reference to the handling of user-generated content, at least in the countries studied. Only a few media companies have in-house guidelines that specify new standards for the practice of participatory communication. Traditional self-regulatory institutions such as the press councils in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, although still regarded as key actors in the public discourse about media quality, are criticized because of deficits in their complaints procedures. From the perspective of the interviewees, these institutions are too slow and not sufficiently transparent; besides, they have little experience with audience engagement themselves. However, models of participatory media regulation, which can be found in instances of media watch blogs or media criticism on Facebook and Twitter, do not fare much better and are only rarely considered to be an effective alternative.

### ***Wave two: challenges from the perspective of citizen journalists***

The second wave of the interview series moved the focus to the perspectives of digital citizen journalists who are working for different kinds of journalism projects within and outside institutionalized media, be it as a non-professional contributor to established news media,

a collaborator on a larger citizen journalism platform, or an autonomous operator of a hyperlocal or community-oriented news site or blog. The aim of this wave of the study was to explore the norms and values that citizen journalists refer to in their activities and analyze how their normative reference points compare to those in professional newsrooms. This phase of the research project was undertaken in six European countries: United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland (Kus, Eberwein, Porlezza & Splendore, 2017; Eberwein & Porlezza, 2018).

The interviews showed that notions of journalistic quality and ethics differ considerably in the heterogeneous field of citizen journalism. When asked what were the most important norms and values that influence their engagement as citizen journalists, one group of participants pointed to concepts such as truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, etc. – those quality criteria that have been shaping the discourse about journalism ethics in Western democracies for decades. Another group, however, perceived norms such as transparency and responsiveness as playing a more important role, a first hint to support the assumption that the ethics of journalism are going through a transformation process in digital media (Eberwein & Porlezza, 2016). So which rules and guidelines are governing the ethics of digital citizen journalists? The interviews revealed five themes:

- 1 A large number of citizen journalists hardly differ from professional media practitioners in that they are committed to established ethics codes in their field such as, for example, the German Press Code or the Swiss Press Council's Declaration of Duties of a Journalist.
- 2 However, quite a few citizen journalists distance themselves from established directives of the press councils. They have developed proper codes of conduct – or at least basic recommendations in terms of a netiquette – for their own citizen journalism projects, which they regard as mandatory for themselves and their peers.
- 3 Other citizen journalists, in turn, are reluctant about a generally binding codification of quality standards. Rather, they solve ethical problems on a case-by-case basis and trust in their own judgment on one hand and a selective adoption of universal ethical norms on the other hand.
- 4 Some citizen journalists, however, vehemently dismiss any responsibility for normative claims and introduce the audience as a point of reference instead. From this perspective, “ethically correct” is what the users of a website consider to be correct. For example, if a contribution is criticized in the comment section, the authors are expected to feel obliged to react. As long as criticism is absent, there is no problem. In this approach, quality standards are forming between all involved actors in a continuous negotiation process, which is an inherently incomplete project and, thus, can never lead to any permanently valid and generalizable guidelines.
- 5 Finally, a few citizen journalists interviewed for this project admitted outright that journalism ethics are fundamentally irrelevant for them. Their publications, therefore, lack a discernable foundation of values. Whether their work can still be considered a functional equivalent to professional journalism is questionable.

### ***Wave three: challenges from the perspective of media users***

The first two waves of the interview study provided evidence that the audience plays an increasingly important role in the contemporary discourse about journalistic ethics. In order to encapsulate the influence of this group, wave three concentrated on the perspectives of

media users who regularly comment on and criticize journalistic content. A three-country comparison in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland made it possible to reveal their motives and expectations (Eberwein, 2020).

Previous research has shown that journalists are often helpless when they have to deal with critical online comments, particularly when those comments are made in an aggressive tone that can border on hate speech and trolling (Erjavec & Poler Kovacic, 2012). However, interviews with critical users demonstrated that the typical “troll” does not exist. Instead, it seems appropriate to cast a nuanced view on dysfunctional follow-up communication and differentiate the types of critical comments based on their motives, of which five emerged:

- 1 *Pursuit of truth:* Some users devise critical comments because they want to disclose no less than the “whole truth”, which – in their view – is often blanked out or intentionally “covered up” in many professional journalistic articles.
- 2 *Opinion formation:* Other commenters, in contrast, pursue a less absolute aim. They do not want to change journalism at its roots, but rather increase the plurality of published opinions. Their personal views (or sometimes also a verifiable expert knowledge about certain issues) are understood as purposeful contributions for stimulating broader societal discourse.
- 3 *Provocation:* Still other commenters stress the element of provocation. They believe it is a necessary and inevitable strategy to challenge other users because there is no other way to reach awareness in the online world. For them, however, provocation is not an end in itself, but rather a consciously applied instrument of attention management.
- 4 *Anger management:* Additionally, there is a group of users who describe their online activities as an act of anger management. They are so disappointed by conventional journalism that they need to seek a channel for reducing their frustration.
- 5 *Entertainment:* Finally, a few commenters admitted publishing disruptive comments just for fun. This type presumably comes closest to the image of the typical “troll”. These commenters do not act as advocates for a certain issue or a group of people, but rather want to amuse themselves at the cost of others.

Despite the obvious differences in motives of the surveyed media users, nearly all those involved in the study were united by a common feeling: their discontent with the quality of journalistic (mass) media, which they voice critically and often aggressively. Such allegations are mostly perceived as irritating by journalistic actors, particularly when established rules of civility fall by the wayside. However, the study did clarify that even provocative comments by online users often intend to convey a pertinent concern. Indeed, only a small proportion of the interviewed commenters questioned the fundamental existence of journalism. Most of the respondents had thoroughly practical suggestions when asked for their ideas for raising journalistic quality standards. More transparency in the newsroom processes was at the top of their wish list, followed by better error management, more first-hand coverage, and also improved possibilities for vocational training. More than anything, however, the participants of the study called for an increased willingness by journalists to enter into a dialogue with the audience, which would be a prerequisite for working on solutions for the critical issues at stake. From the perspective of the users, the evidence of willing journalists was hardly discernable, at least in German-language newsrooms.

## Conclusions

The results of the empirical study underline the assumption that an ethic of journalism based on the conceptual distinction between producer and user is no longer appropriate in the digital age. Instead, a broader ethic of produsage would make it possible to address all types of journalistic communicators, both professional and non-professional. This broader ethic could find a point of origin in the traditional norms and values of professional journalism (such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and accountability), while also taking into account the requirements of participatory communication that can be observed in the digital journalism practiced by traditional media companies, citizen journalists, and numerous ad-hoc participants who offer content through comment sections of journalistic news sites or on social media.

Interviews with various stakeholders demonstrate that a coherent ethic of participatory journalism does not exist (yet), even though its necessity is largely undisputed. Although participants in all three waves of the study describe similar challenges in the process of participatory content production, they refer to different sets of norms and values to justify quality judgments about media products. So far, consensus is not in sight. The study, therefore, illustrates the urgency of a participatory turn in journalism ethics, which is not yet complete.

Still, the interviews provide initial suggestions for the practical question of how an ethic of produsage might be implemented and institutionalized. The interviews illuminated not only the ways journalists handle current challenges in participatory communication, but they also highlighted typical problems of quality management at the level of the newsroom, as well as at the professional level. More specifically, the interviews showed that traditional institutions of media self-regulation are still key actors in the digital media world that many actors look up to for guidance. However, press councils and ombudspople would be well advised to pay more attention to the challenges of produsage. At the same time, in order to facilitate inclusion of the audience in the discourse about journalistic quality, alternative instruments of public media criticism, for example those found in online comments or via social media, should be accepted alongside the established institutions of self-regulation. Additionally, through the interviews, a multitude of ideas for the adaptation and supplementation of existing ethical codes and guidelines – most of which date from the analog media world – emerged. These codes and guidelines should be seen, in principle, as incomplete, and consultations on newly established standards need to be organized collaboratively among professional journalists, citizen journalists, and active media users.

In summary, constant dialogue between professional journalists and all kinds of producers is essential. Journalism ethics under the conditions of participation and produsage need to leave traditional gatekeeper thinking behind and accept the principles of reciprocity and mutuality as a new *leitmotif*. The implications of such a step have already been accentuated by the followers of communitarian ethics and the ethics of care. Their theoretical visions, based on respect for all stakeholders in news production (including professional journalists, their topics and sources, the audience, as well as journalism *per se*), may serve as a model in the process of shaping an appropriate ethic for produsage.

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