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COLLECTIVE CONSULTATION ON CODES OF ETHICS FOR THE MASS MEDIA

Unesco House, Paris, 12-13 November 1973

CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM COLLECTIVE CONSULTATIONS ON CODES OF  
ETHICS FOR THE MASS MEDIA

On 12 and 13 November 1973, representatives of international non-governmental organizations of press, radio and television joined the Unesco Secretariat in consultations at Headquarters on codes of ethics adopted by mass media organizations in different parts of the world. The basis of their deliberations was the resolution adopted by the seventeenth session of the General Conference (resolution 4.112) calling upon Unesco, in consultation with the professional organizations, to lay the groundwork for the preparation of guidelines for national codes of ethics for the mass media.

While several of the representatives expressed reservations about Unesco's involvement in what they considered to be a purely professional question, they pledged full co-operation in the attempt to work out a model for national codes that could be adopted by the profession. They reached general agreement that such a text should be entitled "Ethical Principles for Journalists". The Organization offered to provide a forum for continuing discussions on standards.

A particular point made by representatives of the broadcasters was that there would probably need to be special provisions covering radio and television. They called attention to the fact that these media were in many countries in a monopolistic position and that broadcasting frequently was considered to be a function of the State - either directly or indirectly - rather than of private initiative. Press organizations, however, argued that a journalist's obligations to the public remained similar, regardless of the media employed.

After having been informed by the representative of the Director-General of the way in which work in the field of ethics was integrated into the overall Unesco programme for the mass media, the participants undertook an analysis of the different concepts that were included in the codes submitted to Unesco, in response to an inquiry, by various national and international non-governmental organizations of press, radio, television and advertising. It was felt that this analysis should be widely disseminated for comment and suggestions to media organizations throughout the world, particularly in order to have the benefit of advice from such institutions in developing countries. For its part Unesco would continue its collection of documentation on existing codes.

The collective consultations discussed three techniques for the preparation of guiding principles in the field of ethics. The first was the drafting of a single code that might be of use to professional organizations which did not as yet possess one. The second would be to draft a code containing several versions of certain articles designed to meet the varying needs of media organizations in different countries and differing social and economic systems. The third possibility would be simply to present a kind of "shopping list" of concepts which might be adopted in whole or in part by individual organizations of press, film, radio, television and advertising.

#### Ethical principles for journalists

An examination of the precepts embodied in existing codes of ethics indicates that the broad concepts involved apply to various aspects of the communication process. Some cover the profession as a whole; but others concern particularly working journalists, while still another set of ideas refers essentially to management. This latter category would include specifically radio and television as well as the press.

Concepts for the profession as a whole

1. Truthfulness in reporting. This basic principle of accuracy in reporting carries with it, as an essential concomitant, the integrity of those at the journalistic and management levels.
2. Fairness of treatment. This comprises the obligation to provide a balanced account of a particular news event but also engages the responsibility of journalists and operators to avoid incomplete or deliberately slanted versions, whether they involve an automobile accident or the description of policy decisions in a foreign country. It thus includes a number of important but subordinate concepts such as relevance and factuality.

(While a number of codes also call for objectivity, representatives at the November consultations felt that this concept was impossible to attain and, indeed, in many countries, not desirable. They referred particularly to the widespread practices of a "presse engagée").

3. Reporting of violence and crimes. Avoidance of undue sensationalism is generally considered to be a moral principle to be observed by the working press and its management.

(Generally the representatives at the November consultations were agreed that moderation was the hallmark of reporting not only concerning crimes and violence but also in matters involving sex).

4. Respect for privacy. This concept, in certain cases, overlaps with the preceding principle in that it implies also the avoidance of sensationalism.

(The consultations elicited the opinion that the right to privacy was, however, also conditioned by the profession of the person involved. It was noted, for example, that a national politician or a movie star had by virtue of their position yielded the right to as much protection of privacy as was accorded to a less prominent individual. The participants also called attention to voluntary restrictions on reporting such as those avoiding mention of the past criminal background of a person in the news).

5. Confraternity. The information media should strive to maintain a balance between fair competition and the need for solidarity within the profession. No discrimination because of race, religion or nationality should be accepted.

(The consultations drew particular attention to the problem faced in this regard by correspondents operating in countries other than their own. It was felt that the mass media had a particular responsibility to aid foreign correspondents, action which could also improve the quality of their dispatches by ensuring fuller background knowledge).

6. Professional training. The competence of journalists in all the mass media can evidently be improved by sound professional training, including the inculcation of ethical standards at an early stage in their career.

Concepts designed particularly for journalists

1. Moral responsibility for what is written. In accepting full moral responsibility for the information he provides, the journalist should attempt to verify the accuracy of the information he uses. If he cannot verify it, this should be noted in his story.

2. Access to sources. In the exercise of his functions, a journalist should have full access to the sources of information, particularly those affecting public affairs.

(During the collective consultations, the suggestion was made that access to sources of information, particularly for foreign correspondents, might be facilitated by the adoption of an international journalists' card. On a further point, participants also linked the concept of access to the question of professional secrecy (see below). Another point made was that free access also carried with it the idea that the public should be enabled to obtain the information it needs; i.e. by a multiplicity of viewpoints and the avoidance, in so far as possible, of monolithic reporting).

3. Professional secrecy. The right of journalists to preserve the secrecy of their sources of information is one of the basic principles of the profession. Under certain circumstances, it is understood that the journalist may be obliged to break this rule of secrecy in the interests of society. For example, if a journalist has prior knowledge of a crime, his responsibility as a citizen outweighs that as a journalist.

(In this connexion, the two major non-governmental organizations of journalists have stated their position. The International Federation of Journalists has approved a declaration stating that newsmen should keep professional secrecy regarding sources of information obtained in confidence. The International Organization of Journalists has stated that the journalist respects professional secrecy and keeps private information communicated to him under this condition. He also does not reveal the sources of his information except to his responsible superior if he considers the latter is also bound by the principle of secrecy).

4. Calumny and slander. While in most cases calumny and slander are subject to legal bars, the avoidance of such acts is also a major responsibility which has been included in many existing codes.

5. Plagiarism. Once again, there are laws concerning plagiarism but the codes which include an injunction against this practice are particularly concerned with professional solidarity and the responsibility of a journalist to avoid actions which adversely affect a colleague.

(In this connexion, the signing of an article prepared by a fellow journalist was singled out).

6. Publicity or propaganda. The journalist should not accept payment in money or services for any story except from the media organization for which he works. Since his first loyalty should be to this organization, he should not distort or suppress a story to satisfy an outside source. He should also avoid including commercial publicity in any story.

#### Concepts directed particularly to management

1. Freedom of information. The right to information implies as wide as possible a gamut of points of view on a particular event. In the case of the written press, where there are fewer monopolies than there are in many cases in the field of radio and television, freedom of information is best served by the existence of competing newspapers. In this connexion, therefore, the natural competition among newspapers

should not be employed to diminish their number. The existence of the printed press along with the other electronic news media can also help to provide that diversity of news which is recognizably desirable. Again, therefore, it is to their mutual interest that the competing media function simultaneously.

2. Service to the public. In view of the range and scope of the mass media, they occupy an important position in serving the public. As a result, they should accept moral as well as legal responsibility for the way they handle news. This implies not only avoidance of distortion or manipulation of the news but also the positive effort to promote better understanding within a community and on the international level.

3. Correction of errors. Libel and slander laws ensure to a certain extent the correction of errors in the written or oral press. The standards of good journalism require that to the extent feasible mass media institutions should not await legal action but endeavour to diffuse corrections to honest errors that may have been committed under the pressure of deadlines or because of erroneous information. A number of countries have attempted to regulate the right to correction by law and a United Nations convention on this subject has entered into operation.

(The consultations heard that, particularly for television broadcasters, the correction of erroneous reports imposes a heavy commitment upon the limited time available for news. It is therefore necessary to recognize that the correction process among broadcasters may be restricted to major errors rather than minor ones, such as a mistake in a name or address).

4. Right to reply. As in the preceding principle, the right to reply is as much a moral commitment as a legal one. The written press in many countries has long adopted the principle that this is an inherent right of individuals. For radio and television, the right to reply, however, is again conditioned by the amount of time available for news and also the importance of the event reported.

(The consultations were informed that even in countries with pluralistic and privately-owned television organizations, the exercise of the right to reply is not allowed to stifle news reporting by multiple demands for "equal time", particularly in cases involving election campaigns).

Finally, there are a number of principles, found in certain ethical codes in the mass media, which the non-governmental organizations considered to be of limited application because they corresponded only to particular national situations. For the record, these included: responsibility for national security, penalty procedures for violations of codes, copyright, rules on photographs, incitement to violence, and reporting of official procedures.

ANNEX

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<u>Name</u>	<u>Organization</u>
Mr. Theo BOGAERTS Secretary-General	International Federation of Journalists
Mr. Marcel CAZE (ORTF) Inspector-General	European Broadcasting Union
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Mr. Edward PLOMAN Executive Director	International Broadcast Institute
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