

The Blank Moral Frameworks for the New-Media Journalism Landscape

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The Asian Conference on Ethic, Religion & Philosophy 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This article aimed to study and compare the shifting Media age, to the online media, with the traditional media age in the terms of moral and ethical framework which once was written to control how traditional journalists work. The qualitative methodology, content analysis, was employed for conducting the research. The research revealed that in the traditional media age, the moral and ethical framework of the field of journalism was clearly written. The role of “Journalist” was qualified, certified, and guaranteed to do the work with some controls. Not everyone could join the journalism field. Thailand’s National Press Council has been the organization who in charge. But when the communication field has shift to the online, there is no boundary for anyone who would like to be the online citizen - journalists. People continue posting on social media without concerning for human right, respect, or even fact. Many dramatized news become more popular with the number of likes and shares. Since the journalist on online media need to work fast to compete with each other to be the “Agenda Setter”, the faster the information flow, the less of quality showed. However, there has been no any official moral and ethical framework to control the quality for new-media journalism landscape yet. The suggestion found from this paper is to find the proper way to determine the moral framework for online media and social network in order to control and maintain the quality of online journalism as well.

Keywords: Moral, Ethics, New Media, Agenda Setting, Social Network

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The International Academic Forum
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According to the functionalism, the theory that compares all the parts of society to the human's body which every part and organ has its own function in different ways, but still coordinate each other. As the society, each society has many organizations work together in the cooperative, creative, presentative, and ideology productive ways in order to make the society move forward. Mass media is considered as one component in the society as well, which has the main function to communicate, coordinate every part of society together. Moreover, there are more functions of the mass media in the society too.

Roles and Ethic of Traditional Mass Media in Society

Dominick (1999) has stated the macro-analytic functions of mass media in to 5 categories as followed;

- 1) Surveillance – the informative function which allows society to know the information and data. Mass media always make the awareness to the society about the situations happening around the society area.
- 2) Interpretation – the interpretative and value-giving regarding some situations. Mass media always insert their own values, judgements, or their attitudes to the information in both verbal and nonverbal ways.
- 3) Linkage – the connecting function which can connect all the parts in society together. Mass media always connect and can make some campaigns to the society which can provide to some actions; fund raising, investments.... But, the disadvantage to this function is this may include the anti-social people in to some actions or campaigns.
- 4) Transmission of Values – the socialization function of the organization. Mass media always transmit some knowledge or value from generation to generation, or from place to place. So, the new generation can still be acknowledged the history, culture, or tradition.
- 5) Entertainment – the entertaining function which the media can provide the entertaining programs to the society. Mass media can provide the media for serving people's emotions; dramatic, amused, or mysterious.

For all, these are mentioned to be the macro-analytic function of mass media to the society. Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (no date) stated the relationship between the mass media and society, the mass media organizations act as the small systems which can interpenetrate into any else organizations; political science, science, economics, etc. Then, mass media transmit the information among those organizations and take control of the social system. Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (no date) proposed the concept of social control from mass media as followed;

- 1) If the grand system contains little complex or difference, mass media will determine the boundary of informative communication.
- 2) If the grand system contains more complex, difference, or more pluralistic value, mass media will control the feedback along with communicating news and information.
- 3) When there is the increasing of the information form mass media in the society, the higher socioeconomic status people will seek and expose

themselves to the media more than the lower socioeconomic status people. The knowledge gap will be wider continually.

As the concept showed, further than the functions the mass media provide to the society, mass media take control the social system as well in both feedback and the communication controls. To say, more than the surveillance, interpretation, linkage, socialization, and entertainment, mass media take the control on the information they want to make the awareness in the society too, in which mass media can set the agenda in the society, or the agenda – setting function.

In terms of news and information presentation, the agenda setting function once was coined to the theory, agenda setting theory. First, the agenda setting was established in the journalism period, in 1920 by Walter Lippmann. In 1968, the concept was brought up again, by McComb and Shaw, for the explanation about how mass media can effect to people's lives. According to the theory, since the people are normally not directly involved in every situation (the situations may be too large, too complex to understand), the mass media always set or present to the society with some selective angles of the situations and set as the social agenda for all society can have the same awareness. Sometimes, the mass media set the news or situation to be the most importance by printed in the largest area of the newspaper front page or consistently and frequently presenting on television which can make the awareness to all people in the society to receive how important the information is, comparing to the others. Sometimes mass media try to emphasize some parts of the situation which allows the audiences to be reminded about the situation (priming), yet mass media frame the topics the audiences will have to understand in one time (framing) (Baran and Davis, 2012).

The agenda – setting theory takes place every day in our communicative lives. When the technology has come to be a part of the communication, it turns to be the digital communication. Mark Poster (Littlejohn and Foss, 2008) mentioned about the new media theory: since 1990, world has reached to the Media Age 2 (new media) which has many differences to the Media Age 1 before that time (traditional media) as followed;

- 1) In media age 1, all mass communication were centralized, controlled by formal organizations or governments. Those organizations sifted and selected the information for the society they were in, then transmit to the people. Later on, the mass communication in media age 2 are decentralized. All people can connect to each other without the center control. The emergence of internet plays in the important roles that people can select the information themselves.
- 2) In media age 1, the capital investment was the significance factor to the mass communication systems. Entrepreneurs needed to invest large amount of capital money for the technology employment to transmit the signal to the receivers. On contrast, the media age 2, whenever individuals can connect to the internet, they can immediately communicate to the mass. Thus, the mass communication in media age 2 do not have to

depend on only organizational form. People only need the online channel rather than on-air.

Since people now reach the media age 2, one property of the internet communication is the speed of connection. The online media which any individual can connect to the world as both the senders and the receivers, makes people's communication more decentralized. Everywhere – connection is now the new norm of communication. The shift from the centralized traditional media to the fast connection to the world, the agenda setting in the society is changed too. By using the internet, media themselves can go with more speed in agenda setting, surveillance, interpretation, socialization, or entertainment. Meanwhile, the receivers go with the same speed exposing into the information via all mobile electronics devices.

With this reason, online media are playing in more important roles, dramatically in speed for agenda setting and also the reaching from the audiences. Macnamara (2014) has concluded in the research, *The media for agenda setting: Mass media and/or Online social media?*, that information and news nowadays could be produced from anyone anywhere anytime. There were some contradictions, contrasts, or correlations among those information. The agenda setters constructed the content from people's information, then people would distribute those information around. The difference between the mass media agenda setter and the audience agenda setter depends on various factors. The high impact information (political crisis, natural disaster, the relationship between governments...) are mainly always set by the traditional mass media. When the information which relate to the people lives directly (homeless people, accident, riot...) are mainly constructed by the online social media.

When the media landscape has changed, many journalism or news publishers need to adapt their business into the competitive model which is both off and online channels. Speed and the area of news spreading in the shortest period of time come up to be the very first concerns for all journalism organizations. On the other hand, according to the change of media landscape, those new competitive concerns lead the society to be more lack of ethical framework, especially in the online platform.

Ethical framework, once stated for the mass media, was defined as the right on the rules and regulations for each type of mass media. Ethics and morals are the cooperative fellowship in the practical ways as the norms in the society. Ethics and morals are not the law, and no punishments, but the social sanction from the audiences (Itsara Institute, 2009). Both news gathering and reporting have the ethical and moral framework as the following;

1) News objectivity

In news gathering and reporting, the journalists need to present in every relevant parts of the situation, not only one side or one angle of the news. The content in the news need to be neutral, without any bias from the journalists. In term of conflict, journalists need to present the content from both sides equally.

- 2) *Human's right and privacy*
Sometimes, in the news with violence (murder, rape, accident with numbers of the lost lives...) journalists tie some values, feelings, or bias into the situations. Or, some names from the victims or lost lives are mentioned in the news. Moreover, some photographs of the dead victims can have some effects to the audiences, both the normal audiences and the relatives of those victims. This is what the journalists have to concern about the human's right. The obvious example was on 17 August 2015, the explosion at Rajaprasong junction, Bangkok, Thailand. Although many lives were passing away, the photos or the videos should not be duplicated, especially online, without the censorship or permissions.
- 3) *The Anonymity*
In the investigative news, the journalists need to conceal the source person and make to the anonymous. Because the information of the sources may get the sources to the hazardous situation after the news published. In the meantime, if there is too much concealing, the news may not be credibility enough.
- 4) *State self as the journalists*
Before getting into the interview or any forms of news gathering, the journalists need to provide the self-introduction by stating the name, organization, and the objectives to declare that the information will be used only in the news.
- 5) *Benefit and conflict concern*
The sources may want to comply the journalists with some cash or items for reporting some information which can be their advantages. Sometimes, the journalists are asked to hide or conceal some truth, or only present the information which are helpful to them. This is what people have arguments on about the moral and ethics in journalism. The solution should be the journalists need to provide their information and contacts on the newspaper, so the readers or audiences can be acknowledged who is responsible for the articles.
- 6) *Sympathy and closeness*
Some concern which can make the news biased is the closeness or the sympathy between the journalists and the sources. Or, the journalists are asked not to report the news which can cause the bad reputations to the sources. This sympathetic concern can lead the news to be out of focus.

Moreover, the ethical and journalistic academia, Mr. Sathien Pantharangsi, has stated his attitude about the definition of the journalist and mass media; the mass media should act like a quality public canteen which is the great giver to the society (knowledge, information, conscious, and the significance of children – feminine -

handicap people) by not to invade the human's right including not to make the repeatedly sufferings to any individuals or families but give the right to all public audiences. These definitions and concepts consistent with the regulations of journalism (Thailand press council, 1998) which was published in 3 main categories; (1) The morals and ethics of newspaper, (2) The morals and ethics of journalist and (3) The practical regulations of the journalists. From content analysis, all 29 ethical and moral concerns about the field of journalism can be categorized into 6 categories, ordered by the amount of concerns, which are;

- 1) The objectivity of the news
- 2) The concern about the effects to the relevant individuals
- 3) The publicity, not taking any side
- 4) The credibility from the sources
- 5) The immediately correction
- 6) The maintenance of the journalism dignity by not taking the money or items as the gift.

As above, the mass media in the traditional media age, especially the journalism field, has both written and unwritten morals and ethical framework to follow. The common points of all reviewed frameworks are about the objectivity, the effects to the relevant individuals and the no-biased content. Since the media age 1, all mass media are centralized. They are under the organizations who can take control over all the activities; news gathering and reporting. As long as the control happens on mass media business, the morals and ethical framework are still working. But, when the media age 2 has come to the world of mass communication, mass media landscape changes. So does the morals and ethical framework in agenda setting.

Agenda Setting in Media Age 2

When the internet takes control the communication, the morals and ethical framework boundaries are blurred. Many new terms about online journalism emerged. Ward (no date) has stated 2 levels of information about the ethical framework of online journalism, called "Digital Media Ethics", which covers blogging, digital photojournalism, citizen journalism, and social network as the following;

1) Level 1: The differences in ethics and moral from traditional mass media and the online media

Because not only the mass media organization can work on the internet, but the individual citizen are also able to join. The ethical and moral roadmap of the traditional mass media was aimed to the validity of the information. The proof before news presentation was significance. Gatekeeper function was dominated for mass media. When in the new media era, speed, transparency of the situation, partially presentation, amateur and citizen journalist, and the immediately correction were considered the major properties instead.

2) *Level 2: The differences of the effects*

The results and effects from news presentation can occur in 2 major levels; micro-level (country, community, village...) and the macro-level (international, global). And for the new media, the information can be widespread in macro-level rather than micro-level in short period. They are sent from continent to continent in one click. And the effects could be too large to be responsible.

Moreover, many boundaries of the journalism field are blurred since the coming of the internet as the medium. The morals and ethical framework turn to be too hard to define. Yet, when there is the unidentified boundaries of moral and ethics, the communication ways could be more harmful and sensitive as the following (Ward, no date);

1) *The definition of the "Journalist"*

In the former time, journalists were the people identified and certified by the organizations to collect the data and report the situation by using the mass media. But in the new media era, anyone can be the "online journalist", either the certified journalists or even the amateur journalists who can only connect to the internet. When anyone in the society can be the journalist, the organizational sifting processes are discarded.

2) *The loss of anonymity*

Normally, when the audiences would like to submit the feedback to the organizations, the ombudspersons would read through. And if the feedback was picked up to be reported on the next issue, the name of the feedback giver would be omitted. Compare to the new media, the ombudspersons are not necessary. The read-through process was cut off. Audiences can give their feedback as the comment on the social platform in public. The names, even the fake names, are showed. Because the users can set their own user names and change them, people are not afraid of showing their attitudes and comments. But, the IP address tracking can be done in another process to verify the users.

3) *Speed, Rumors, and Corrections*

Because of the speed of the communication, every news agency needs to be the first organization to spread the news. Internet and social media are the tools that all news organizations use for catching up the trends. The sifting process is hidden in case of the speed and timeliness. Sometimes, news agencies use the information which are flowed on the internet without and sifting or finding further information. And, some rumors was reproduced by the news agencies because of speed demands which can cause the bad effects to the society and lead to the correction in next stage.

4) *Partially / Partisan Journalist*

New media as the internet is the open platform for every user. Audiences choose to present their standing points, including the journalists.

According to this reason, many journalists keep reporting the news from their standing points and attitudes which contradicts to the moral and ethical framework about the non-biased news gathering and reporting. At least the politics, journalists use the online media to expose their opinions and attitudes with less objectivity which sometimes causes the dramatization to the society.

5) *Entrepreneurial journalism*

The sponsorship from the business can support the news agencies. News organizations need to find the investment, capital, and sponsorship. From that point, news agencies need to pay respect to the entrepreneur business by NOT present the negative news or information about them. This leads to the non-objectivity information or content.

6) *Online personal brand building*

Many news agencies want their journalists to build up their own personal branding by using some platform of social media. Facebook, Blog, or Twitter are the way that all journalists can communicate to the world by posting their attitudes toward some situations. Then, numerous likes, shares, and followings happen. Those biased or one-side attitudes from the journalists may contradict to the information from the main news agencies and to the morals and ethical framework also.

7) *Ethics of images*

When the online media emerged, the photojournalism goes online with speed. Smartphone technology can make all snapshots quicker, sharper, and easier. The VDOs go on the same way. Many times people share the images on their account by not recognizing the sources or even the truth. Because there is no centralized sifter anymore, citizen and amateur journalists can take the picture and post in the platform right away. Without concerning the human's right of the person who is in the photo or VDO clip. According to the speed provided by the internet, the censorship may not be done before posting which means the human's right of person is being invaded.

From above, when media landscape is changed, the journalism landscape is changed too. The clear cut and obvious boundaries of morals and ethical frameworks in journalism turn to be unclear and blur. The contradictions of both traditional media and new media about the morals and ethics can be compared as the table below;

The comparison between morals and ethics of journalism field on traditional media and new media

| Topic of morals and ethics | Journalism field in traditional media | Journalism field in new media |
|--|--|---|
| Information and content of the news | <i>News gathering and reporting must be objective. Journalists have to report every aspect which relates to the situation. All the reporting should be done with no bias or side taking.</i> | <i>Journalists need to build up their own personal brandings. The social network platforms allow them to be free to express their opinion rather than the objectivity. The journalists report more partially information to communicate their standing points to the society.</i> |
| Journalist | <i>The journalists need to be identified and certified by the organizations or news agencies, according to the written law and regulations.</i> | <i>The journalists can be anyone in the society. Citizen journalists and amateur journalists can post or report any situation on the internet and social media platforms. Both images and texts can be spread into wide area in short timing. And there is no concern about the sifting process and in the traditional media.</i> |
| Speed and Timing | <i>The work system of the traditional media has many processes, and there are centralized. Before any news submission happens, it takes time to find the credible sources and information.</i> | <i>In social media, information flow much faster and wider. All people in the society can act as the journalists. Someone who provide the information can be the licensed journalist, citizen, or amateur journalist. Including many types of information; textual, VDO, or the live broadcasting, all users can make them happen with no time and no sifting process required. This leads to the human's right invasion problem and so on.</i> |

| Topic of morals and ethics | Journalism field in traditional media | Journalism field in new media |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Anonymity | <i>For some cases, the journalists need to conceal the sources' information, or the related persons'. Because when the news are broadcasted, there could be some harmful situation happen to those people in the news, both physically and mentally.</i> | <i>In new media platforms, because users can generate their user names, they tend to be more encouraged to express their feelings, attitudes, or comments. The anonymity is not necessary anymore. But, in reality, the IP address tracking can be employed to identify who the users are in the society. This means the anonymity does not exist when there is any information posted online.</i> |

Moreover, agenda setting in social media has one obvious characteristic. In Thailand, when there is any loss or accident happen, the online media often shows the posts which focus about the lost lives from the situation, including profiles, uncensored images, or any information which can cause the dramatized feeling to the audiences. Not only the audiences cannot understand all situation, but this is also the human's right invasion to the lost persons and their families. It can be further harmful to their families when the news are repeatedly showed up, which contradicts to the morals and ethical framework for journalism field.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There has been the large shifting from the media age 1 and media age 2. Not only the communication way changes, the morals and ethics change as well. The agenda setting process in traditional journalism has many processes to make sure that all information will be true, although this takes time. Whereas in the new media era, the information sifting and those centralized processes have been already cut off. The information widespread can be done rapidly and easily. The morals and ethical framework boundaries are more blur in many aspects; objectivity, journalist, human's right, anonymity, and so on.

Likes, shares, and number of comment in the social media platform can be some indicators which inform the scale of how people in the society want to duplicate the content, most of them are dramatized news. This can lead to the reproduction of the news which can harm the feelings of the relevant people. Some news are presented by the photos, or VDO which can be concerned as the human's right invasion. The morals and ethical frameworks are obviously seen more unclear in many societies, especially Thailand.

According to the situation, the effects of the new media era on the morals and ethical frameworks in journalism and agenda setting may need some further studies to make the boundaries more clear and practical. This article leads to the recommendations as the following;

- 1) Government and the ministry of Information Communication and Technology need to set up the conferences to combine both news agencies and the internet heavy users (bloggers, influencers) to brainstorm and set the result as the outline and frameworks for morals and ethics on social media.
- 2) Education organizations need to arrange the training session about the online media and ethics for the university students.
- 3) The research organizations need to conduct more research both qualitative and quantitative to get the practical research findings about the using of new media for journalism. Then make the proper way and recommendations to set up the morals and ethical frameworks online.
- 4) Government and relevant organizations may set up the public relations campaigns communicating about the ethical concern, especially the human's right invasion online.
- 5) State the law and regulation on the online morals and ethical frameworks, also the practical punishments for those who violate.

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