

Media Ethics: From Information to Markets

Media institutions are essential instruments of democracy, but they are also companies and actors in economic markets. We often reproach the media in a way that brings to light these two roles they bear. The lamentations are common: the regretful slogan “if it bleeds, it leads” suggestive of the sensational character through information is sold, the intensified coverage of “attractive events,” such as celebrity adoptions, that are otherwise minor when compared to other, more pressing politics. These complaints often express as dissatisfaction with media organizations’ fulfillment of their roles as democratic institutions, which serve a number of functions: acting as the guard dogs of valid and truthful information, increasing the quality of public debate, as well as contributing to the democratic vitality of other institutions, to name a few. Yet, as private enterprises, media institutions are also subject to the responsibility of increasing profits, which leaves many to treat information as a commercial product. This second role seems to accommodate, if not justify, the objects of the above lamentations. Consequently, the following question arises: are these two responsibilities contradictory? Otherwise put, does the economic nature of media institutions bring them to produce information of a higher quality or more information of lower quality?

The objective of this conference can be summarized as addressing these questions. More particularly, we want to try to take into account the adversarial nature of the economic environment in which journalists evolve and conduct their work. While this adversarial perspective is frequently used in business ethics research, it has yet to be systematically applied to studying the roles and responsibilities of media institutions. Our conference aims to explore these perspectives in a manner that brings to light the tensions of a free press in a free market, while examining the practical solutions that are available.

Objectives

This conference, which takes place on the 17th and 18th of April 2009, will permit us to assemble specialists, ethicists and journalists and hear their perspectives on the questions the conference theme poses. This event will serve as the halfway point to the more distant objective of publishing the texts that will be presented on this theme. The presentations are organized around three main panel themes. They will treat theoretical questions as well as concrete cases.

Theme 1: Media Ethics: A theoretical point of departure

What is the role and what are the responsibilities of the media in democratic societies? How are journalists subjected to professional ethics codes? How does these latter affect their double roles as members of a democratic institution and competitors in the market place?

Theme 2: New media, new stakes

Journalists collect, analyse and communicate information through a variety of media. Each one of these aspects seems to have been transformed by the evolution of the technological and economic context in recent years. Do these transformations lead one to envisage a somber future for media corporations? Do they bring us to rethink the role of the journalist? Do these new technologies and milieux have as much of an impact as we think?

Theme 3: Media and markets: an inevitable confrontation?

To say that journalists evolve in a competitive environment is a euphemism. They are employed by businesses, which are in competition with one another, and they are often in competition with one another within their own companies. Whether this be healthy or nefarious contest, does this justify all forms of competitive practices? Should it be excused, tolerated or encouraged? Does it call for alternative normative treatment?

Importance and topicality of subjects

These questions not only solicit a great deal of attention in theoretical treatises on the media, but are equally prevalent in public media. A day rarely goes by without a journalist, politician, reader or viewer raising the question of the roles and duties of the media. The Council of Quebec Media recently presented the results of a vast public consultation campaign on the possibility of obtaining quality information from the media in Quebec. An attentive reading reveals that this uncertainty rests on the commercial nature of the information. This is why it seems pertinent to us to take up the question of journalistic ethics from the perspective of business ethics. The media is largely a collection of businesses and their product plays an essential democratic role. To our knowledge, very little research has been presented from this angle. There is an abundant literature on the roles and responsibilities of the media, but very few texts in business ethics that attempt to take into account the role of journalists as employees of a business. Otherwise said, business ethics is often a study of professional obligations of economic agents. It is also considers competitive institutions like economic markets. Thus, it turns out that journalistic ethics is applied to a context that is essentially competitive. One of the principal contributions of this conference is to take into account the adversarial nature of media institutions, its benefits and its drawbacks

Research contribution of this research

This conference will make three major contributions to research. First, it will enable us to take stock of the principal ethical issues linked to the commercial nature of Canadian and international media. Second, it will provide an opportunity to bridge the work conducted in business ethics with research on the roles and responsibilities of the media. In this sense, the conference will contribute to developing a network of Canadian and foreign researchers. Indeed, three research centres in ethics are involved in the organization of this event: le Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal, Media@McGill, and the Centre for Ethics at the University of Toronto. Lastly, and more concretely, this conference will allow us to sort out the right public policies to manage the media in Canada.

Value of the means of diffusion

In addition to having taken particular care in drafting a program that is appealing to guests of different domains (in both academic and media spheres), the proceedings of the conference will be published in the journal of CRÉUM, *Les ateliers de l'éthique*. As well, the conference will be recorded and made available online for free at CRÉUM's website, under its section "Radio-Créum.", as well as on Media@McGill's website. We will use these free and accessible means of distribution for the valuable contribution it will make to the international academic community.