ETHICAL EDUCATION
AT WESTERN SCHOOLS OF JOURNALISM

ЭТИЧЕСКОЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ
В ЗАПАДНЫХ ШКОЛАХ ЖУРНАЛИСТИКИ

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Current trends in the public sphere reveal the need for a clearly formulated, objective and socially sanctioned system of ethical requirements to guide the work of mass media professionals. However, the question of ethics in media has yet to be sufficiently investigated on a rigorous theoretical level in Russian media scholarship. The lack of Russian theoretical formulations can be contrasted to the long-standing interest of Western media experts in theoretical understandings of the subjective conditions necessary for journalists to observe ethical requirements in practice.

This difference, on the other hand, seems to be leveled, by a shift in public consciousness in both Russia and abroad regarding "formal morality", which is characterized by bountiful use and abuse of ethical terminology in the modern social lexicon. The

outcry for morality expressed in the media often demonstrates only incompetence and a lack of understanding of the real problems.

Our research demonstrates that, despite speicialized curricular offerings in journalism programs in both Russian and Western universities in the fields of professional ethics and social responsibility, students do not really acquire a framework for making ethical decisions.

This article considers pedagogical traditions in instruction on media ethics in Russia and elsewhere, presents the results of an analysis of several western approaches to courses on journalistic ethics at the university level, and compares the results of disparate teaching methodologies. The study draws on data obtained from foreign scholarly publications, on the author's interviews with American and European professors, and on classroom observation of relevant courses at Western faculties of journalism.

Key words: *social responsibility, professional ethics, practice of ethical education, methodological approaches to studying of journalistic ethics, resolving ethical dilemmas.*

Актуальные события общественной жизни со всей очевидностью обнаруживают потребность ясно сформулированной, объективной и социально поддержанной системы этических требований, предъявляемых профессионалам массмедиа. Однако эта тема остается недостаточно исследованной на теоретическом уровне в российской академической литературе. Этот пробел в существующей российской теории сопровождается давним интересом западных специалистов к теоретическому пониманию субъективных условий, необходимых для практической реализации этических требований журналистами.

С другой стороны, особого внимания заслуживает феномен изменения отношения в общественном сознании к "формальной морали", характеризуемой злоупотреблением этической терминологии в современном социальном словаре, наблюдаемый и в России, и за рубежом. Часто развернутые в СМИ дискурсы на тему морали демонстрирует некомпетентность и отсутствие понимания проблемы. Исследование показало, что в то время как образовательные программы по журналистике в разных странах предлагают специализированные курсы по профессиональной этике и социальной ответственности, студенты и российских, и западных университетов испытывают трудности с выработкой практических навыков принятия этических решений.

В статье представлены результаты анализа западного подхода к преподаванию курса по журналистской этике. Материалом исследования послужил анализ актуальных зарубежных научных публикаций, интервью автора с американскими и европейскими профессорами и личных наблюдений при посещении соответствующих курсов на западных факультетах журналистики.

Ключевые слова: *социальная ответственность, профессиональная этика, практика этического образования, методологические подходы к изучению журналистской этики, решение этических дилемм.*

Introduction

The insufficient level of ethical concern in modern journalism is symptomatic of a general crisis – not only economic, but also spiritual – developing in the world over the last decades. To become

aware of, and to understand, the current state of ethics is the single most crucial means to begin overcoming this crisis. We believe this postulate can be taken as an appropriate point of departure in any discussion of moral affairs and their relation to the profession of journalism. However, given the endlessly broad scope of the theme of ethics in the media, this paper focuses on one maneageable aspect: how journalists-in-training are schooled in ethics.

Today, in a period of Russian history characterized by uncertain national ideology, the responsibility of journalists for their words be they printed in the press or aired by electronic media, increases dramatically. Quite naturally, a course on the ethical foundations of journalism is one of the most important steps toward a degree in journalism in major Russian universities. We emphasize that the formal academic requirement of a course titled "Professional ethics in journalism" appeared in the curricula of journalism departments rather recently in accord with a new era of history. This fact largely explains the noticeable shortage of undergraduate level textbooks on the subject. In fact, the only undergraduate level texts that have been published to date in Russia are Lasutina's "Professional ethics of the journalist: a textbook for departments of journalism" (appeared at the end of 1999, republished in a revised edition in 2011) and Avraamov's "Professional ethics of the journalist: education textbook" (published in 2003).

No doubt, this is important background information for becoming aware of the gap that needs to be filled. That is why teachers preparing such a course have had to rely on few scholarly and practical sources, including their own notes and methodological materials, or basic monographs devoted to the broad subject of ethics as a social-philosophical category. The undoubted advantage of monographs notwithstanding, in a rigorous education of undergraduates they fall short of mark, as they often fail to cover the most challenging

questions. Academic monographs are an extremely important for source for scholarly work, but they do not make the subject easily accessible to students at the undergraduate level.

According to our observations, problems concerning ethical regulation of professional journalism comprise one of the most popular research areas in western academia. European and American universities and research institutions support special centers of media ethics, organize conferences and symposia for specialists on a regular basis. Such outlets as "Journal of media ethics: exploring questions of media morality" (formerly known as "Journal of mass media ethics", 1985-2014), "Poynter ethics journal, media ethics magazine", or "iMediaEthics" (formerly known as StinkyJournalism.org, 2004-2011) publish the latest news, investigate ethical dilemmas and lapses, and thereby provide a first-class discussion forum for academics working in the field.

Each year major publishing houses such as Oxford University Press, Routledge, and Palgrave-Macmillan issue serious monographs devoted to various aspects of media ethics. A sampling of titles from among the most significantly and critically-accalimed volumes demonstrates this point. Within the last half-decade, for example, the following books have appeared: "Ethics for public communication: defining moments in media history" (Christians, Fackler, Ferre, 2012); "Media ethics: issues and cases" (Patterson, Wilkins, 2014); "Ethics of media" (Couldry, Pinchevski, 2014); "Contemporary media ethics" (Fuse, Land, Hornaday, 2014); "The new ethics of journalism: principles for the 21st century" (McBride, Rosenstiel, 2014); "Media ethics: key principles for responsible practice" (Plaisance, 2014), "Sage guide to key issues in media ethics and law" (Babcock, Freivogel, 2015), and "Media ethics: cases and moral reasoning" (Christians, Fackler, McKee, Kreshel, Woods, 2016).

This recent boom of special publications on the ethics of journalism by foreign academic presses underscores the dominant role of this subject in today's world. Conversely, in Russia all recent writings on media ethics *per se* are associated with a only few names that can be counted on one hand. In this sense, the subject remains largely uncharted territory for academic researchers in Russia.

Methods and concepts

How useful for Russian specialists will the examination of the theory and practice of professional ethical education abroad prove to be? Does the analysis of media ethics and ethical education for example in Europe or in the U.S.A. contain some ideas that might be helpful in the education of future Russian journalists? In our opinion, the enormous body of information and experience accumulated abroad because of systematic studies in the field of professional ethics represents an invaluable asset for Russian scholars of journalism on the normative and practical levels. At the same time, certain theoretical contributions of Russian researchers and methods for selection of ethical alternatives in the Russian media for journalist education might also be interesting for our foreign colleagues. This can be considered yet another illustration of the manner in which those humans open up to an idea when they anticipate immediate practical application of their new knowledge. After all, ethical blemishes on the part of journalists are generally among the first to be noticed by the public.

For this reason, we base our research on both a literary review, and on an analysis of comparable pedagogical strategies at Western schools of journalism. Collaboration and interviews with western professors on teaching media ethics complete the methodology.

Diversification of choice in higher education can enhance learning for everybody – this is our first finding. Both Russian and Western instructors hear from students that they have to be more sensitive to diverse educational strategies and programs.

The difference is that western countries do not have mandatory national curricula for colleges, as Russia does. Moreover, the USA, for example, does not have a national ministry of education that regulates academic standards. American students are free to choose what courses they wish to take depending on their ability and educational goals.

The next point of our investigation is connected with conceptualization of a given subject in different academic systems. In many respects, the leading methodological problems of Russian and Western educational systems relate to the analysis of relationships between the practical needs of society and practical aspects of journalists' ethics. However, in comparing the teaching of media ethics in Russia and abroad, then we note that in many respects the "Russian approach" pays more attention to linking modern practical dilemmas to classical theories and philosophical foundations of ethics. In contrast, the results of our research suggest that the so-called "Western approach" chiefly focuses on real episodes and events in the practice of ethics by media professionals.

Teaching media ethics: case studies

Let's consider, for instance, a media ethics course at the flagship Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri (USA). One of the top journalism schools and the oldest formal journalism school in the world, it is known for its "Missouri Method", according to which students learn about

journalism simultaneously in the classroom and through practicing it in multimedia laboratories and real-world outlets. The school provides an academic education *and* practical training in all areas of journalism and strategic communication for undergraduate and graduate students across several media, including television and radio broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, photography, and new media. Several affiliated professional organizations, including Investigative Reporters and Editors, Pictures of the Year International, and The Reynolds Journalism Institute allow students to interact with working journalists. It also operates an international journalists' magazine, a local city magazine, a statewide business journal, a statehouse news bureau, and two student-staffed advertising and public relations agencies. Practical application of classroom knowledge loops back to further academic inquiry.

No wonder that in such educational institution the Media Ethics course is conducted mostly as a seminar and that the central question in each session is "Why"? (Why should we publish this and not that? Why should we protect sources? Why should we disclose potential conflicts of interest to clients or readers? And so on.) Readings of specialized literature, class discussions, papers, thematic videos and films all help students address that one central question.

In an interview, one American professor explained that several goals are set out which this course is meant to achieve: to increase student awareness of and ability to identify the moral dimensions of issues that arise in the practice of journalism and advertising; to allow students to question and critique the conventional wisdom of the profession and, therefore, to offer students the possibility of helping to change and improve it; to help students learn tools of moral reasoning for dealing with those issues. Along the way, according to the instructor, other benefits are likely to accrue,

namely, a better understanding of journalism and advertising and their place in society, and a better understanding of oneself.

In order to meet these goals, the course schedule includes theories of ethics, moral rules, ethical decision-making, and special topics such as codes and behavior, truth and truth telling, accountability, loyalties, privacy, advertising. Evaluative means to assess student accomplishment of the course goals include the following requirements: responses to "thought questions"; a small-scale literature review; composition of a substantial term paper; and active participation in class discussions. Each student's grade is broken down as follows (the percentage notates a part of the final course grade):

30%: "Thought questions". Almost every week students write responses of roughly two pages to questions the instructor poses. Each must satisfactorily complete at least 10 of these responses during the semester. [Twenty pages of writing.]

15%: Mini-lit review. In order to explore what scholars are saying about issues in media ethics, students review seven or eight sources from the literature on a topic of their choice in a paper not more than five pages long.

20%: A first draft of the term paper. Students select a topic for their term paper of 12-15 pages after consulting with the professor. They may choose to focus on an issue in the field of ethic (for example, whether reporters should go undercover to get a story even if doing so means they must lie about their identity), or a more general academic issue (such as the ways in which ethics codes are employed in newsrooms). Students may tackle the same topic as they did for their "mini lit review", but are not required to do so.) This first draft is allotted 20% of the final course grade in order that students invest substantial time and energy in research and in developing an argument about their findings.

30%: Final submission of term paper. This should be a polished academic piece.

5%: Participation. Each student is expected to attend every class and to complete assigned readings for each class meeting. Students are urged to come to class prepared to contribute by having something to say: informed participation is the key to course discussions as well as to success in the course.

Another case study of methods for teaching media ethics comes from a course with the same title, Media Ethics, taught at the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Kansas. This school is one of the few top schools of journalism in the USA that requires a course in media ethics. In the welcome address of the Dean for students it is highlighted: "We say it's not enough to be graduating highly skilled journalists. We want to make sure that our students understand the critical role they play in society." (*Brill,* 2016).

The cases presented in the course packet are intended as the basis for class discussion about media ethics – and not to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an ethical situation. The professor organizes his class into discussion teams from the moment it begins, and teammates decide how best to work together to analyze, prepare and present the cases. Interestingly, everyone on the team earns the same grade, so it is to a student's benefit to collaborate in producing a well-considered and thoughtful decision.

The classroom atmosphere established by the instructor is meant to be "safe", which is to say that all opinions are welcomed. Everyone has a right and an obligation to participate. The students listen carefully with an open mind and ask for clarification when necessary. They challenge one other's ideas with factual evidence and appropriate logic. From meeting to meeting, they become more willing to change their mind if others demonstrate errors in their

logic or use of facts. The most important thing is to avoid ridiculing others and attempt to respect beliefs of others, even those that are different from their own.

One of the goals facing anyone who endeavors to help students learn about ethics in journalism is to get across the idea that achieving consensus on a universal standard of behavior is not a simple task. We can learn the classic ethical theories, but when we are confronted with an ethical code, we may have different perceptions about what we should do. As Knight Distinguished professor of journalism John Ginn said, "Ethics isn't something you have. It's something you do." (Basow, 2005: 5).

That is why it's so appreciable a tendency at Western schools of journalism to learn how "others" approach ethical situations, which could be different from the way that an individual deems correct. Accordingly, it is crucial to discussions of media ethics to create an open environment where students are encouraged, but not pressured, to share opinions and feel that all points of view will be welcomed.

As the instructor of classes in media ethics since 2002, the author of this article observes that the main difference between Western and Russian approaches in teaching media ethics is the principal objective of such a course. Said another way, Russian instructors tend to help students develop an understanding of moral reasoning, and Western instructors tend to help students develop the skills to use it in resolving ethical dilemmas, both individually and in a team environment. It appears to us that this difference is reflected in course structure. In Russia, Departments of Journalism tend to have a lecture course on media ethics, perhaps offering additional seminars. Westerners tend to teach case-analysis and discussion courses that rely on a combination of out-of-class group work and in-class discussions.

However, it seems that despite all of these variables, Americans have nearly the same problems that Russians have in regard to the system of ethical education in departments of journalism. Experts — both academics and practitioners — concur that although many programs in journalism and mass communications offer instruction in ethics or social responsibility, students never really develop a framework for making ethical judgments. (Meyers, 2010; Cheney, May, Munshi, 2011; Roberts, Arnett, 2008; and others).

Numerous western authorities on the subject of social responsibility agree that the need for a renewed emphasis on ethics in mass communications has never been greater. (Christians, 2009; Wilkins, Christians, 2009; Fortner, Fackler, 2011; Brown, 2011; and others) Indeed, events of the last decades reveal the need for a clearly formulated, objective and socially supported system of ethical requirements to guide professional journalists. Here we refer not only to the situation in Russia or in the United States. Such "complaints" in scholarly work can be documented in many different countries. (Fortner, Fackler, 2010; Nikolaev, 2011; Global Media Ethics: Problems and Perspectives, 2009; Ward, Wasserman, 2010; and others).

These and other experts write about numerous factors in national media systems that render ethical education particularly difficult nowadays. Besides, ethical foundations in the professional activity of journalists became a topic of great practical interest after significant increase in the role of mass media throughout the world. It is obvious that today ethics is more readily viewed in shades of grey, rather than black and white. It has been shown repeatedly that one cannot consider ethical principles learned at any School of Journalism as a mechanical panacea for negotiating moral dilemmas. It is clear, though, that much links modern practical dilemmas and classical theory with philosophical foundations of ethics; both are urgent matters in ethical media practice.

They cannot be analyzed or even considered in separation from the broader cultural context prevailing in a given society.

Conclusion

In view of substantial historical and cultural differences between Russian and Western societies, these contrasts in journalism on a practical level may appear even sharper when they are analyzed from the perspective of concrete journalist activities. That said, particularly in the area of professional ethics, media specialists could reap tremendous benefits from the ongoing exchange.

Reflecting on the full scope of analysis presented here, and bearing in our mind the idea of professional ethics as a social-philosophical category in the everyday practice of modern journalism, we conclude that the provision of students with the requisite theoretical background cannot be the sole motivation behind inclusion of courses on professional ethics in university curricula. Other objectives, just as central, must inform such courses with the primary aim of serving students optimally:

- to develop and improve critical thinking, reading and writing skills by focusing on the relationship between mass media and society;
- to identify and analyze contemporary ethical issues;
- to develop a basic ability to understand a variety of philosophical approaches in order to solve issues in media ethics, and to apply basic ethical principles and standards to professional situations;
- to develop an understanding of moral reasoning and the skills to use it in resolving ethical dilemmas not only individually, but in a team environment;

- to form career-related values.

In our view, the most important feature of this particular subject for undergraduate education should be a practical grasp of the key ideas that comprise the moral code of the professional group into which these students will enter in the near future. This will allow for the development of professional positions that will functionally accord with established ethical values.

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