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The impact of media in the theory of media ethics

Abstract

The following article consists of two parts. In the first part, I am going to discuss the critical attitude of media employees when it comes to professional ethics, trying to identify the main reasons for such an approach. I am then going to point out to those areas of media activity which are in general either not covered by the codes of ethics or are treated insufficiently and inadequately, particularly when the modern conditions of the functioning of media are taken into account. In the second part, I am going to discuss a few examples of ethical codes, expressing at the same time certain criticism with regard to some general concepts of the ethics of media.

Key words: media, ethics, philosophy.

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According to a study by S. Mock and his colleagues, the majority of journalists do not see the need to formulate any codes of ethics¹. They believe that in order to perform the profession of a journalist, general and universal ethical principles are sufficient, whereas journalists should be guided by their conscience and moral intuition that no code can in fact replace. Here is the answer given by one of the respondents to a research on the subject: “the only signpost and assistance in assessing what one is doing is the culture and a sense of decency”². There are also certain

1 It is worth noting that the importance of codes of ethics is noticed by one of the Catholic journalists. Compare with S. Mocek, *Dziennikarze po komunizmie...*, p. 113.

2 *Ibid*, p. 113.

concerns that codes of ethics could become a tool for reducing the independence of journalists (“the community of journalists could already create a code of ethics, but it might actually be too obnoxious”).

It is however difficult to agree with this view. First of all, it should be noted that professional codes of ethics determine the rules of conduct of certain professionals, whereas their purpose is not the welfare of these people as such, but rather the wider good of a given social group – the recipients of services in question (patients, students, media viewers etc.). The code of ethics would be therefore designed specifically for media professionals, but it would serve the well-being of media recipients. In other words, the aim of any media ethical code should not be the protection of journalists, publishers, editors or managers from various temptations, so that to keep their conscience clear of besmearing, but rather the safeguarding of the rights of their recipients. The existence of clearly formulated ethical principles allows the recipient to realise what they can actually expect from media and they can also understand to what extent their consumer rights might have been violated. What therefore follows from this point is that media codes of ethics cannot be confined to a category of prohibitions and obligations, but they should also take into account the rights of the recipients.

Another reason to support the practicality of the ethical codes in this context is the education of future journalists. Getting to know the code, analysing its specified rules and discussing them with a lecturer or other students might allow the prospective media employees to become aware of the existence of moral conflicts typical for the media world, what might allow them later to anticipate and avoid any such encounters. The precondition to provide a solution to any given moral conflict is, first of all, to become aware of it and to word it clearly. Many mistakes and glitches occur due to the haste and fatigue, what seems to be more characteristic of a media employee than an office worker. It should be said that a college course of ethics preparing for working in media (journalism, public relations) is for many prospective media employees the only opportunity to consider certain ethical issues in a more depth³.

It is also not true to claim that an ethical code has no practical significance, because media people are guided in their conduct by their own moral sense and not any code as such. In the US, in some editorial offices, new employees are obliged to sign a set of ethical principles, whose any drastic and obvious violation might become the basis for a court action. Although the ethical code, understood as a set of rules applicable in the legal sense, does indeed impose certain restrictions on

3 The lack of professionalism of the Polish media was evidenced when they became the only broadcaster to report that it could have been possible to avoid the victims of tsunami that had hit the Maldives, had not an employee of one of the Maldivian ministries confused the word ‘tsunami’ with the name ‘T. Sunami’. The message, reported by the Polish Press Agency, was taken from one of the websites that opposed the dictatorial government of the Maldives. Compare with A. Szewczyk, *Internetowe legendy a miejsce w społeczeństwie obywatelskim*, in: *Za wolność...*, p. 88 et seq.

one's freedoms, this is eventually a limitation in the name of some broader good – an issue which touches the whole spectrum of ethics in the same way⁴.

While ignoring the code of ethics might not be synonymous with disrespecting the ethical principles *sensu stricto*, it seems that to some extent it contributes to the decline of trust in media and the consequent diminishing of their prestige. Similarly, the reluctance to conduct a deeper ethical reflection does not necessarily have to concern all journalists, but it would actually be very interesting to find out what views on this issue are represented by ordinary and shadow journalists⁵.

In chapter I, I mentioned that the type and extent of the impact of media on consumers is a debatable matter. If, however, we were to accept that this impact is rather negligible, then the creation of media ethics would make no sense. The disputes concerning the way in which media impact their recipients do not mean, however, that the formulation of ethical rules and their compliance becomes less important. The sufficient condition for the application of ethical standards in this case is the very probability of such an impact. We also have to realise that a large part of our knowledge about the world as well as our perceptions and stereotypes come from media. And because we make decisions based on our knowledge of the world, the mere existence of media message is sufficient to consider media as capable of 'influencing' if not the course of events, then at least the mentality and spiritual condition of the society.

In order to formulate ethical principles, it is therefore necessary to determine the type of influence of the media in question. Sometimes mass media might directly arouse certain political events. Media experts draw attention to the stimulating effect of television on the revolution in Romania in 1989 as well as on the genocide in Rwanda. Also the press is able to play an important role in this regard. It was the press that became the primary forum for political discussion in Spain during the reign of general Franco⁶. However, the ability of media to influence the course of events is exaggerated sometimes. An example to this could be the mounting expectations focused on media in the post-communist countries immediately after the fall of regime⁷. Such a form of enthusiasm combined with an idealised image of media and their impact on the social life of a country could also be observed in Ukraine. A Ukrainian media expert, Taras Lyko, wrote immediately after the

4 It should be remembered, however, that the protection of the freedom of media is not only the duty of media themselves, but of the whole society and state institutions alike. As noted by J. L. Cury, in Central European countries, the transition period is marked by continuous efforts to restrict this freedom, and one of the ways here was to use certain legal provisions, for example, the provisions on defamation. Compare with J. L. Cury, *Transformacja mediów w Europie Środkowo – Wschodniej: komplikacje wolności dla każdego*, in: *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 90 et seq.

5 Unfortunately, there has been no reliable research in this area. Such studies would answer the question whether this anonymous majority from among 25,000 Polish journalists does actually share the views prevailing among the journalistic elite, or on the contrary, whether the aversion to ethical reflection increases relatively to the place occupied in the professional hierarchy. This second possibility would actually sanction the opinion that any adherence to ethical principles might be an obstacle to one's career development.

6 Compare with B. Dobek-Ostrowska, *Miejsce o rola mediów masowych...*, pp. 17, 23.

7 Compare with B. Ociepka, *Wprowadzenie modelu mediów publicznych w Polsce*, „*Studia Mediodoznawcze*” 2001, No. 2 (3), p. 33.

victory of the 'orange revolution': "the true mission of journalism is to ennoble the souls, awaken sensitivity to the painful areas of our era and strengthen the highest values. This task has stood in front of the journalism for centuries and will always do. We cannot talk about human rights, while at the same time forgetting about the right to defend oneself from demoralisation"⁸. It is a sad sign of our times that there is almost no one to set such ambitious goals for media in Poland today.

The impact of media on the opinion and behaviour of consumers is not in general very direct, as evidenced by numerous examples⁹. When it comes to the process of transmitting the message, the recipient is not passive (just like the sender), but is actively involved in its interpretation. The final impact of media messages would therefore depend on their actual content as well as on the type of recipients in question, representing a defined type of personalities, experiences, education, etc.¹⁰ On the other hand, however, according to a classic thesis by B. Cohen, media do not decide what people think, but rather what people think *about*. In other words, media are often the only source from which we derive information allowing us to build a picture of the modern world. This has important implications for the assessment of the quality of media by the public. I will return to this topic later in this chapter.

Yet, still much more dangerous seem to be the unintended effects of media. These effects are difficult to predict and it is even harder to counteract them. They are associated mainly with the mechanisms of media functioning, which have recently undergone a form of sudden transformation, and additionally in Poland they took place at the time of the political transition. Some major changes in the way that media function have been caused by the development of technology. As J. Volek states, "hasty computerisation or mass application of new information and communication technologies produces unintended consequences"¹¹. And it is not only about the creation of the Internet, which on one hand overcomes certain obstacles when it comes to the access to information, but on the other it leads to social isolation. The argument here is also about the creation of satellite TV, which allows reporters to broadcast live from remote locations with no time for a critical reflection and editorship of the transferred material. Modern technologies have significantly reduced the costs of media functioning, what has in turn contributed to their expansion (for example, in Poland, in the early nineties of the last century, several thousands of new press titles were created, most of which have gone bankrupt, however, in a very short time).

According to J. Volek, one of the unintended consequences of an increased presence of technology in media is 'the electronic isolationism'. The author also draws

8 T. Lyko, *Media i transformacja społeczna: przypadek Ukrainy*, in: *Za wolność waszych i naszych mediów...*, p. 26.

9 For example, in spite of a slew of one-sided messages in the American media about the relationship of President Clinton with Monica Lewinski, around three-quarters of Americans did not lose their confidence in the president. Compare with C. J. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 51.

10 *Ibid.*

11 J. Volek, *Niezamierzone skutki „komunikacyjnej ideologii” w kontekście społeczeństwa informacyjnego*, in: *Media masowe w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 37.

attention to some key assumptions, typically of Western origin, on the positive influence of mass communication¹². These assumptions are linked to the concept of maximum openness and pluralism of media, but it merely leads to the disintegration of the society-wide communication space into a number of isolated communities ('non-communicative islands') showing a decreasing interest in a broader debate (political, religious, trade union, etc.). According to J. Volek, the public sphere is increasingly shrinking now and the main reason for this contraction is the emergence of new technologies.

There are also many other negative and unintended impacts of media. Television is generally accused of being 'a drug and tool destroying and depriving people of their human ability to imagine and picture', while at the same time some people postulate to subject it to a strict supervision¹³. Media are also accused of creating a complete and homogenous image of the reality, one for which there is no alternative (Adorno and Horkheimer).

The development of electronic media has also caused changes in the way we understand information. According to research, analytical thinking is being progressively replaced with 'emotional thinking'¹⁴. This might in turn lead to some profound changes in our system of values, the first manifestation of which, according to Z. Sareło, was probably the emergence of rebellious youth movements in 1968. The crisis of values has also contributed to the perpetuation of the consumptionist way of life, on the other hand though, it has also led many people to search for values in the realm of esotericism. Z. Sareło mentions also about the "growing aspirations of one's autonomy, which among other things are expressed in claims to one's own personal morality and the right to be different; suspicion when it comes to the ideology and unwillingness to get engaged in politics; the loss of our sense of security"¹⁵.

The impact that technology exerts on media should make us think whether certain rules on the use of modern technologies should not be put into effect. This refers to both direct (e.g. the aforementioned live broadcasts) and indirect, long-term effects of the presence of technology in media. It seems that the ethical codes in this context should also take into account the unintentional, and typically associated with the development of technology, effects of media on their varied audiences.

One of the ethical norms, which I mentioned in Chapter I, is the principle of serving the interests of the society. It turns out, however, that the concept of public service, even if it is not immediately discarded, is sometimes perceived far differently as compared to the understanding attributed to it by the fathers of ethical codes.

12 "Communicating has thus by itself become a social virtue". J. Volek, *Niezamierzone skutki „komunikacyjnej ideologii”...*, p. 40.

13 Compare with W. Godzic, *Telewizja. Ziemia jałowa czy pieszczota dla oczu*, in: *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów...*, p. 71.

14 Compare with M. McLuhan, E. McLuhan, *Laws of Media. The New Science*, Toronto 1988, p. 67 et seq.

15 Z. Sareło, *Media w służbie osoby...*, p. 34.

First of all, at least in the political transition countries¹⁶, public service is understood by media as a quest to build civil society. By burdening the media with the task of shaping a particular model of the society, however, we agree in fact to promote a certain vision of some ideal concepts, which do not exist in the real world. As noted by K. Ogorzały, the term ‘civil society’ takes the form of a postulate in the Polish press that is based on certain normative assumptions. The author believes that this concept is used in the press for ‘diagnostic’ reasons, because with its aid one can determine how democratic the Polish society in fact is. The definition of this concept is also based on the assumption that there is a clear line of division between the society and the state, which can be presented “as if these two entities could not be reconciled in the same arena, thereby suggesting that the state exists outside of the society and is not one of the functional social systems”¹⁷.

It should be also noted that media are not outside of the society and that one of the elements of civil society are civic media¹⁸. In other words, one cannot have civil society without civic media, and the other way round – civic media cannot exist without the civil society. From this point of view, to say that the duty of media is to build a civil society is a form of truism. One can certainly assume that media have gone faster than the rest of the society from the realm of totalitarianism to democracy, but this assumption treats media as an intellectual and political elite¹⁹, what might actually raise a number of further problems as mentioned in Chapter I. Perhaps, therefore, that overall postulate²⁰ for the creation of civil society should be converted into a minimalist postulate, according to which the role of media is not to get actively involved in the process of building the civil society, but rather to remove obstacles, should they appear.

The analysis does also show that this declared concern for the civil society does not go hand in hand with the concern for the health of the society as such. For example, the growth of social optimism is certainly not strengthened by the fact that the vast majority of electronic broadcasts concerns negative events²¹. Hence,

16 The temptation to burden media with the task of mobilizing the society to undertake various grassroots activities does not seem to be typical of countries in the transition period only. Already A. Tocqueville claimed: “when people do not have strong and enduring ties, one can induce them to cooperate only by persuading each individual that their very personal interests require voluntary efforts with those of others. This objective can be fully achieved only by means of the press (...)”. A. de Tocqueville, *O demokracji w Ameryce*, Kraków 1996, V. II., p. 121.

17 K. Ogorzały, „*Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie*” jako konstrukt komunikacyjny w prasie, in: *Za wolność...*, p. 82 et seq.

18 K. Kopecka, *Lokalna partycypacja medialna a społeczeństwo obywatelskie*, in: *Za wolność waszych i naszych mediów*, as edited by I. Borkowski and A. Woźny, Wrocław 2006, p. 76.

19 One can have the impression that this was the way that the editors of ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’ magazine comprehended the task of media, which as it seems, at least in some areas, has contributed to a decline of social trust in it.

20 “The ‘civil society’ concept is gaining the form of a postulate in the press, behind which there are always some normative principles understood as the most basic values for the functioning of democracy”. K. Ogorzały, „*Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie*” jako konstrukt komunikacyjny, „*Studia Medioznawcze*” 2005, No. 1 (20), p. 82.

21 B. Łódzki has in his research even claimed that public television tends to headline information about violence more often than a commercial station TVN. Compare with B. Łódzki, *Agresja, przemoc i terror w polskich programach TV*, in: *Media w demokratyzujących się...*, p. 177.

one can have the impression that the chairman of the Slovak Radio and Television Board, Peter Jurasz, was right when he accused one of the radio stations in 1996 for “a lack of objectivity and soothing tone”²². This statement was reprehensible, because it concerned only the way in which information about the activities of the ruling party was broadcast, and its purpose was to limit the freedom of expression. But media certainly look at the reality from a particular perspective, one that is neither ‘objective’ nor ‘calming’.

The gap between the society and the state is not merely a theoretical construct propagated by media to create a space for discourse, but it actually manifests itself in practical situations. According to B. Dobek-Ostrowska and R. Wiszniewski, “the lack of understanding of social, political and economic phenomena and processes as well as the lack of identification with public decisions and choices by the citizens generates a form of conflict between them and the authorities”²³. Media do often become an area of manifestation of these conflicts, because both sides are trying to win their sympathy²⁴. This in turn puts media under a strong temptation to advocate for one of these parties. This temptation is twice as strong when media get entangled in various political and economic affairs and when they try to meet certain expectations of the society.

Media do not only try to meet the expectations of the advertisers or political parties (for example, by remaining silent or marginalising certain issues), but they also try to provide their customers with ‘a product’ that they really need. This is the reason why media place so much importance to public opinion polls. However, this faith in polls and surveys as a recipe for commercial success is not always justified. “A huge mistake, as noted by Maciej Iłowiecki, which is strengthened by media, is the overestimating of the so-called public opinion polls”²⁵. According to M. Iłowiecki, the answers that people provide critically depend on the questions themselves and the very way in which they are structured. Moreover, the majority opinion can never determine what is right and valuable, whereas media tend to treat and present survey results as conclusive in all matters²⁶. One should also remember that typically our knowledge about the world comes from media, what means that they significantly contribute to the shaping of the public opinion.

On the other hand, if media are to serve the ‘fourth power’ function, we should define our expectations towards them and determine to what extent they are able to meet them. Excessive expectations on the part of the recipients appear similarly unjustified as any attempts to completely deny the existence of various obligations on the part of the media. The wording of such basic expectations seems to be quite a straightforward thing. In the transition period, media should support the process of changes in the sphere of politics, economics and the wider social life, and so

22 Compare with P. Skowera, *Upolitycznienie mediów w Czechach i na Słowacji...*, p. 127.

23 B. Dobek-Ostrowska, R. Wiszniewski, *Teoria komunikowania publicznego i politycznego*, Wrocław 2001, p. 25.

24 An example here could be the conflict concerning the construction of a road through the valley of Rospuda.

25 M. Iłowiecki, *Prawda i manipulacja w mediach*, in: *Za wolność waszych i naszych mediów...*, p. 39.

26 *Op cit.* at note 25.

promote the principles of democracy (especially in politics, but also in the sphere of economics, what is often forgotten). Media should also educate people with regard to the basic mechanisms and procedures underlying a democratic state, explain the essence of changes and present different points of view in a truly fair manner, etc.²⁷ Similar expectations can be raised with regard to other participants of the public life, for example politicians. They can also be required to support media freedoms so that political transformation can in fact broaden their scope. The poor state of democracy in Poland is certainly not only the fault of media²⁸ and it is the realm of politics itself that could be made responsible for this weakness.

In countries with established democratic systems, expectations towards media are slightly more modest. Some ethicists even suggest that in the long run it pays to follow certain ethical principles in media just as it is done in any business. Such a stance is advocated, for example, by C. J. Bertrand, according to whom media managers should take care of “providing primarily the quality services”²⁹. According to the author, more profits can be actually made by media entities on the content which is valuable and non-violent³⁰. The same author also believes that one of the main features of media entertainment is its “aesthetic mediocrity”, “intellectual emptiness” and “moral weakness”, whereas media, in order to serve any wider public good, “should create and shape the taste”³¹.

When watching various entertainment programmes (for example, in both commercial and public media in Poland), it is fairly hard not to get the impression that the term ‘aesthetic mediocrity’ might actually refer to their vast majority. We can obviously expect media to raise the aesthetic and intellectual level of their entertainment programmes, but one should remember that we shall not express this desire in a form of moral order, as there will always be a group of customers who will treat any disappearance of worthless content as a limitation upon their right to entertainment.

To impose the duty ‘to create and shape the taste’ as a moral obligation on media is not only equal with granting them with the right to decide what is valuable and

27 W. Bennet, while assessing the state of media in political transition countries, claims that in many cases they have done more harm than good. The author is also of the opinion that media are able to meet all these expectations, provided that they become aware of the responsibility incumbent upon them. W. Bennet, *The Media and Democratic Development: The Social Basis of Political Communication*, in: *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions*, as edited by P. O’Neil, Boulder 1998, p. 38. The task of encouraging people to undertake common and grassroots initiatives can only be fulfilled by those media, which have already gone along the way from a totalitarian system to democracy. Hence, it follows that media that cannot fulfil this function, has not in fact yet moved up this way.

28 According to W. Jednaka, the following are the symptoms of a weak Polish democracy: a deficit of democratic values, the absence of civil society and certain imperfections of democratic institutions. Compare with W. Jednaka, *Wybory parlamentarne w latach 1989 – 2001*, in: *Demokratyzacja w III RP*, as edited by A. Antoszewski, Wrocław 2002, p. 94.

29 C. J. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 32.

30 An example here could be such children movies as *The Lion King*, *Harry Potter* and *Where is Nemo?*, which proved to be real ‘blockbusters’, to use media terminology. Compare with C. J. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 142. However, none of these films is devoid of violence and brutality, while extreme here were also their production costs, which could only be born by the biggest film studios. *Harry Potter* has also aroused considerable controversy in the Catholic circles.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

what is 'aesthetically mediocre', but in fact it is also the first step towards transforming media into an instrument of transformation of the world³². Linking media with the world of politics and business might lead to a situation where there are various ideas as to how media coverage should look in terms of its aesthetic as well as intellectual and moral value.

Much less contentious is the issue of media responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The very codes of ethics appear to treat the principle of objectivity as a basis for media ethics. Meanwhile, the survey conducted by S. Mock indicates that the vast majority of journalists "undermine the principle of objectivity as a fundamental value of their work"³³. When confronted with questions, journalists pointed to the inability to maintain complete objectivity, while stressing the need to promote it, or they simply rejected the principle as not only impossible but also unnecessary, replacing it with the principle of independence (these studies were conducted by S. Mocek among the elite of the Polish journalists).

To suppose that the lack of faith in the 'journalistic objectivity' among the elite of Polish journalists stems simply from their awareness of the involvement of media in politics and business, as well as from their conscious acceptance of this entanglement, would be an oversimplification. At least several factors can be listed here that may in fact affect the content of media communication regardless of the good will of the sender. One of the reasons for this journalistic scepticism when it comes to the principle of objectivity seems to be the confusion of objectivity as a feature of the reporter (so the moral virtue) with objectivity as an attribute of the message (the communication)³⁴. Whereas the principle is that it is a journalist transmitting information who should be objective and not the message itself. Using the terminology of logic, one could say that the subject of this principle is a journalist and its field is a collection of information. Objectivity is expressed already with the very desire to preserve impartiality, and so the notion that objectivity as such does not exist is not entirely false from this point of view, because one can be objective only when compared to someone who is less objective, just like when comparing someone brave with someone who is less daring or someone who is tall with someone who is less so, etc.

The problem of distinguishing between objectivity as an intention and objectivity as an attribute of a statement becomes particularly difficult when media face some expectations from their customers as to the way of transmitting certain content, and they try to meet those needs. This type of scenario occurred with the death and funeral of John Paul II. While most journalists and media experts seem to be consistent with the assertion that media played its role properly at that time, there are still critical voices. A. Brzezińska-Mandat, for example, believes that already several days before the death of John Paul II, media "had started their battle for the viewers and their emotions by presenting certain forms of press coverage, includ-

32 C. J. Bertrand does not hide his sympathies for the Marxist ideas.

33 S. Mocek, *Dziennikarze po komunizmie...*, p. 179.

34 One of the respondents in the study of S. Mock replied: "there is nothing objective, because everyone writes something from a subjective point of view". S. Mocek, *Dziennikarze po komunizmie...*, p. 180.

ing on various papal pilgrimages to his homeland and the whole of his pontificate. The countdown had begun and one could not get rid of the feeling that media were waiting for the closing of this theme. A form of contest had also started for the first medium to announce the sorrowful message³⁵. The author also mentions about certain reports presenting “artificially dramatic relationships”, viewers sharing with their sadness publicly or discussions about the mystical dimensions of the pope’s death. The author then writes about the fact that the Polish Press Agency “notified about the miracle” at one time and that “Gazeta Wyborcza” magazine wrote about the “holy wind”, etc. These formulations themselves seem to point to a negative assessment of the media behaviour from that time, all the more that the author herself makes some pejorative interpretations too. She states, for example, that it is difficult to distinguish between a genuine grief and “national hysteria, into which the Polish nation likes to fall”. In her view, the absence of advertising in media at that time did not result from the mourning mood, but it could be the reaction of advertisers who were worried that their products would be “wrongly associated”. It is also possible, as the author further suggests, that in fact it was all about a form of short fashion for faith in media or that it was calculative to “fake mourning after the pope, because that was exactly what the public had expected: information that all the media give a due honour to the pope and sink into sadness”³⁶.

To reduce the coverage merely to dry facts would have been in this case certainly consistent with the principle of objectivity, but for the most part of the audience it would have been probably rated as a betrayal of the social mission of media. To decide how media should have behaved in this situation does not seem possible. Similar interpretations as to the conduct of media would have been possible also in the case of media adopting some other strategy. If they had moved beyond their role, it would have been only by marginalising and stigmatising any critical comments about the way of reporting³⁷. And here, however, one cannot be certain whether we would have been dealing with the suppression of freedom of expression by media for religious reasons, or with a ‘normal’ expression of hostility towards any attempts to challenge the infallibility of journalists.

Another reason for a dim ‘popularity’ of the principle of objectivity among the journalists seems to be the understanding, somehow incorrect, of its very scope. One should realise that this principle does not play an equally important role across all the types of media providers. Apart from the entertainment media, it also applies, although to a limited extent, in the so-called opinion media (and thus in the Catholic media). The opinion-forming press, according to C. J. Bertrand, “can distort the reality for ideological or political reasons, but it can also suppress any opposing voices and pass somehow unfair or even abusive judgements”³⁸. The

35 A. Brzezińska-Mandat, *Medialne potrzeby obywatelskiego współodczuwania (analiza mediów od dnia śmierci Jana Pawła II do jego pogrzebu)*, in: *Za wolność...*, p. 94.

36 *Op cit.* note 35, p. 98.

37 These occasional voices of criticism S. Mocek characterises as follows: “shameful and appalling in this respect were the statements by Jerzy Urban and Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz (...), but similar events, if they took place anywhere else, caused a strong opposition of the public opinion”. Compare with S. Mocek, *Dziennikarstwo po komunizmie...*, p. 219.

38 C. J. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 29.

same author notes, however, that such media have no right to incite hatred against minorities and promote violence. Certainly, one can specify a number of additional, more specific restrictions here, for example, the ban of the so-called Auschwitz lie or the prohibition to present paedophilia in a positive light or to recruit to religious sects, etc.

One of the reasons why media are allegedly biased because of 'their very nature' is the need for information selection. This is carried out according to various criteria, whereby the standard of 'media attractiveness'³⁹ does not always turn out to be the most important one. One should also notice that this criterion of 'media attractiveness' of a given piece of information (just as any other kind of media message) derives from the very fact that media recipients draw their attention to the content "from the field of interests which have been reflectively thought-out and freely adopted"⁴⁰. Those interests, as claimed by psychologists, can be awakened and nurtured. On the other hand, one cannot deny that very often the general subject of media discourse covers topics which are considered important by the public, with issues not meeting this requirement appearing in media only occasionally⁴¹.

Another important selection criterion of information is to what extent it is intelligible by the recipients, what among other things involves the degree of the latter's mastery of the language in which the information in question is expressed. Contrary to the opinion of some journalists⁴², this does not mean that media content should always be adapted to the intellectual level of its recipients. Since media provide for one of the main sources of the knowledge about the world (apart from the education system), so it seems that they should also cater for the recipient to understand some basic concepts.

N. Postman notes that one of the forms of limiting the circulation of information present in every culture is the practice of taboo. According to the author, it might take many forms: from refraining to mention certain topics through to various prohibitions relating to certain types of information as well as myths and religious beliefs by which we select information upon delivery. N. Postman also believes that the disintegration of certain existing myths might further indicate the collapse of a coherent vision of the world, and so therefore people are inclined to look for new traditions, hence new information selection criteria. According to Postman, the very source of contemporary myths, upon which we tend to organise our world, is science⁴³.

39 According to the model of J. Galtung and M. H. Ruge, any information published in media must relate to short-term events which are: easily noticeable, clear, meaningful for the recipients, in line with the expectations, unexpected, repetitive, balancing (contrasting with other events), relating to the major political forces and social elites, personalised and negative. The more of these conditions any media message can target, the higher its place in the news. Compare with Z. Bauer, *Gatunki dziennikarskie*. in: *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów...*, p. 154.

40 Z. Sareło, *Media w służbie osoby...*, p. 37.

41 N. Luhman, *Teoria polityczna państwa bezpieczeństwa socjalnego*, Warszawa 1994, p. 43.

42 When in 1995, in Poland, an opinion poll showed that 42% of consumers did not understand the content of television news, journalists from one of the editorial offices declared the society as illiterate. Compare with C. J. Bertrand, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 134.

43 N. Postman, *Technopol. Triumf techniki nad kulturą*, Warszawa 1995, p. 90 et seq.

The very defiance of this sort of taboo should be one of the duties of media, but one should also take into account that any gradual cleansing of the social discourse from all sorts of prohibitions and restrictions might necessarily entail certain negative effects. One of these are significant changes in the sphere of social customs. "In the contemporary culture, as J. Volek suggests, the uncovering of personal and intimate information as well as the intrusive forms of voyeurism have become a colloquial communication component. It seems that the modernist imperative of openness and communicativeness has gradually taken on hypertrophic characteristics, becoming a form of grand exhibitionism"⁴⁴. The author speaks of voyeurism and exhibitionism that have become important parts of the modern media, evoking among media recipients the impression of being subject to constant observation and supervision. Although various television talk shows refute certain myths and inhibitions that have been rooted in the culture for centuries, they also create a false impression of belonging to an ideal community in which one can be embraced and accepted no matter what they do.

The development of technology, as a result of which various negative phenomena, such as 'social isolation', can be observed, seems to impose on media the duty to care for 'their interactive element' of communication. Interactive media can be understood as including the Internet⁴⁵ (and other media using it, e.g. web TV, internet portals of newspapers, etc.), however, one should not forget that traditional media can also give the possibility, albeit to a much lesser degree, for their consumers to participate in the communication process. One of the forms of such a participation could be letters to the editor (including electronic), which, as far as it is possible, should be replied to. But these could also be special programmes with the participation of audience, in which ordinary people can talk about their lives and their problems. Talk shows, which are sometimes regarded as being the symbol of evolution of the modern media⁴⁶, offer an example to this category of programmes. Another form of 'interactivity' can be also provided by the opportunity to choose programmes from a large number of TV channels on offer, so the recipient can actually create their own media content (make their own "media content assembly"⁴⁷). The scope of the recipient's contribution here is somehow limited, however, especially on account of the increasing standardisation of the programme offers in electronic media and, on the other hand, because of the recipient's general competencies, that is their general knowledge about the world as well as the extent of their interests or language proficiency, etc. This fact has an important implication for the understanding of media responsibility.

44 J. Volek, *Niezamierzone skutki „komunikacyjnej ideologii”...*, p. 49.

45 But as noted by K. Jakubowicz, it is not quite obvious that the Internet is a place of authentic discourse. It does not provide for "deliberative interactions leading to an enlightened understanding of problems and transforming various individual attitudes into consensus and common approach". Compare with *Demokracja komunikacyjna: (nieskończona) ewolucja pojęcia*, „Studia Medioznawcze” 2004, No. 3, p. 25.

46 Some authors even tend to speak of a 'talk-show democracy'. B. Ociepka, *Dla kogo telewizja*, p. 57.

47 Compare with J. Fiske, *Wprowadzenie do badań nad komunikowaniem*, Wrocław 2003, p. 205 et seq.

The situation in Poland is even more complicated, because many changes associated with the development of mass communication technologies coincided with various events related to the political system transformation. The scepticism among the journalistic elite with regard to the principle of objectivity might also arise from a sudden change in the political system and the very dashed hopes associated with it. The point here is not about the deliberate restriction of the freedom of journalists by the editors or publishers, nor about the attempts to restrict the freedom of editors and publishers by the politicians or certain types of economic lobbies, but rather about the fact that democracy does not seem to guarantee the freedom of journalists in absolute terms. In practice, they must comply with legal provisions protecting the good name of others, laws protecting the state and official secrets, various copyrights, inventive and rationalising rights or other general rules on public morality, etc. The amount of these restrictions may actually create the impression that social communication follows strict rules, which might in fact distort the content of media messages, not least by eliminating the possibility of informing about certain aspects of the social life⁴⁸.

These comments do not, however, exhaust the question of ethical problems arising in connection with the development of mass communication technologies⁴⁹ and the process of transformation of different modern societies. One can indeed have the impression that media turned out to be quite helpless in face of these challenges, on the other hand, however, it must be remembered that these changes have been initiated relatively recently and they are still occurring. What speaks in favour of media, therefore, is the fact that they simply were not quite able to recognise these challenges and threats in an appropriate way and so they were also unable to elaborate effective methods of mitigating the ensuing harmful effects. But any formulation of sufficiently detailed rules here would not have been possible even if media professionals had noticed the need for such an ethical reflection; though to question this need, and sometimes even to draw back in fear from formulating any strict ethical standards, can be considered as a kind of *signum temporis* and one of the effects of the changes of media.

In this paper, I am not going to attempt to define such rules. They must be formulated on the basis of a combined research and reflection of several distinct areas (media studies, economics, political sciences, law, linguistics, philosophy, etc.). In addition, nothing actually tends to indicate that the formulation of any such final results or the development of any synthetic principles here is possible at present, not least because of the pace of changes. While it is conceivable to formulate an ethical norm requiring to provide for constant reflection on the various processes taking place within media and their consequences for individuals and societies, this standard would not be able to cause any significant growth when it comes to

48 L. Szot, *Niezależny dziennikarz – rzeczywistość czy fikcja?*, in: *Media a demokracja*, as edited by L. Pokrzycka and W. Micha, Lublin 2007, p. 213 *et seq.*

49 "Unlike physicists, biologists and geneticists, says Z. Sareło, electronic engineers have not set themselves the questions (or they do so rarely and quietly) as to the responsibility for the consequences of the practical applications of their own discoveries". Compare with Z. Sareło, *Media w służbie osoby...*, p. 32.

our knowledge and understanding of the media as such. Therefore, it seems that we are doomed to centre our ethical reflections largely around intuition.

This problem becomes even more complicated because of the impact that media tend to exert on the very process of changes in their external environment⁵⁰. I have mentioned above about different kinds of taboos that tend to inhibit the flow of information in different cultures, contributing to the sustainability of these cultures themselves. Although it is often assumed that media appear to break certain taboos existing in certain societies, yet it does not mean that this phenomenon is related to all kinds of taboo. It does not apply, for example, to the private property taboo or, as in Poland, there is almost no critical discussion on the teachings of the late John Paul II. Hence, somehow justified seems to be the argument that media appear to accelerate social changes in certain areas of life, while inhibiting them in others.

In practice therefore, the main obstacle when it comes to introducing a form of media ethics is the very amount of ethical dilemmas which are inherently associated with media operations and functioning. These dilemmas, as one can see, may also apply to indirect effects that are exerted by media. Another example of an unsolvable conflict here, which is often under the scrutiny of ethicists, is the right of journalists to keep the confidentiality of their information sources intact. According to the Polish legislation, journalists are under a duty to maintain such sources in secret and only the decision of an independent court of justice may lift it. Leaving legal regulations aside, however, one should note that a journalist can sometimes be required to choose between two ethical values: the good of the information source and the common good. The only institution able to resolve this dilemma is then his or her own conscience⁵¹.

The difference between the first type of dilemmas and the above-cited example is that in the second case, there is an individual able to make a definitive decision. A journalist can opt for either the secrecy of their information sources or their disclosure; and he or she should be then subject to the consequences of their decisions accordingly. When we think of media as an institution, that simple decision is not quite possible, and neither is the burden of responsibility in the same sense as when individual media employees are held liable. The awareness of the negative consequences of media operations may, however, become the basis for legislative decisions and various codes of ethics intended not only for the media themselves, but also for their recipients. Only the existence of clearly defined rules here would allow the society for a better understanding of the real impact of media on individuals and the entire social reality. Some governments introduce certain regulatory measures aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of media. In Poland, as I have

50 One can take even a broader perspective when looking at the environment of media. Because they are also companies, they act under the influence of the same factors as other forms of businesses. G. Gierszewska and M. Romanowska mention about several such factors: the political system (regime), political parties, the level of political stability, the participation of a country in international organisations, the availability of government subsidies or the level of trade protectionism. Compare with G. Gierszewska, M. Romanowska, *Analiza strategiczna przedsiębiorstwa*, Warszawa 2002, p. 78.

51 Compare with Z. Sareło, *Etyka społecznego...*, p. 80.

mentioned, such a regulation is expressed in Article 18 of the Act on the National Broadcasting Council – the duty to respect Christian values.

But a very similar argument could be elaborated when it comes to the intentions of an action. While in the case of professional ethics, the ethical correctness of an act is determined by the intention of the subject in question (the goal should always be the good⁵² of the person subject to that action), media coverage is usually a collective work⁵³ created in several independent stages, and so it is therefore difficult to talk about the intentions of media as such. It is hence difficult to agree with the opinion of Z. Sareło, who writes that “the problem of truth in the pragmatic dimension is related in the first place to the intentions of the sender. When the purpose of the message here is not the good of the recipient, but anything else, then a form of falsification of the very essence of communication occurs”⁵⁴. Certain doubts can be raised here as to the proper definition of the sender and whether media should be understood as including the press, in which case it is rather difficult to talk about ‘the sender’. If by this term we shall mean any given media owner, then the purpose of their operation is not the good of the recipient, but their own profit⁵⁵. What sort of programmes appear in various media is decided by their authors, but also various heads of editorial divisions who approve those programmes for the broadcasting. While it is possible to assume that the moral approval of a given action shall be deemed as delivered where the intentions of all parties involved in the process of forming a message concur, this does not change the fact that in practice every message is the result of many different and often contradictory intentions, and it is virtually impossible to make the ethical evaluation of a specific communication message by adding and subtracting the intentions of individual parties.

The indication of moral standards defining the functioning of media is only possible on the basis of knowledge of given facts. This knowledge, however, is far from being precise. What is more, when reading media literature, it seems quite hard not to have the impression that the impact of media is sometimes contradictory. I have mentioned above about the social isolationism related, as it seems, to the development of interactive media, whereas many authors point to the opposite effects of media messages. According to H. Albrecht, we are now in the era of ‘media religion’, consisting of an illusory conviction that we participate in the virtual life and all its aspects. The modern man, as the author states, wants to escape from the reality, replacing it with patterns, values and ideas drawn from media. Even in our everyday life, we try to imitate certain television characters. But because these

52 What also seems obvious is that various media would specifically define this good of a person in a particularly different way from a personality philosophy, which is represented by Z. Sareło. Journalists and editors of ‘Gazeta Wyborcza’, ‘Gazeta Polska’ and the weekly ‘Nie’, among others, act for a specifically conceived good of their recipients, at least declaratively. Compare with I. Kamińska – Szmaj, *Słowa na wolności...*

53 This remark refers to the press only in the slightest degree and perhaps because of this the majority of journalistic ethics relates to the work of press journalists. The environment of press journalists allows for a conflict between their freedom and their ‘programme line’ to arise. Any defiance of the latter, according to the Polish Press Law, can become a reason to make any journalist in question simply redundant.

54 Z. Sareło, *Etyka społecznego...*, p. 49.

55 Compare with Chapter I.

are only some roles reproduced by the actors, the world of everyday relationships becomes the world of fiction⁵⁶.

After all, our participation in the common media space leads many recipients to confuse reality with television fiction⁵⁷, while the lack of any such participation leads them to social isolation and breaking of the process of social communication. In view of this, are we in fact able to word ethical principles relating to media so that their use would not entail negative effects? Even if we assume that both phenomena are harmful, because they do not lead to the development of an individual, but have a degrading effect, what becomes necessary is the need to choose between the greater and lesser 'evil'. This would mean that media are inherently bad, and the society should find ways to counteract this evil. The most effective method to counter this would be to totally abandon media messages (perceived as bad messages, directly or indirectly), which in turn would mean an even more drastic rupture of social communication, and would therefore be a counterproductive endeavour.

Ideal media would therefore need to be materially different from the actual media, and the mere fact that such ideal media do not in fact exist makes us think over the conditions of the possibility of their existence. Such media would primarily need to present a coherent view of the world. As it is clear from the research, nowadays, such an image is more and more fragmented, volatile and contradictory. Furthermore, this image of the world should not be too different from the image that the younger generations receive from their parents. Any excessive difference between these pictures would lead to the breach of tradition and a further impediment of any consensus between generations. Similarly, such a picture of the world should not be made from too many information elements, so that recipients do not develop harmful habits of passive perception of their surrounding reality. It would be also highly appropriate if any information relating to the image of the world, other than the one accepted in a given community, was accompanied by a suitable commentary. Some items and problems that should not be critically discussed could also be identified, since they would constitute for the basis of sustainability of the culture and the wider social structure. Any community wishing to keep their identity intact would need to have their own media, which should remain in a relative isolation from media belonging to other communities. The basis for the functioning of media should be the rule that any lack of information is better than virtually incorrect or incorrectly transmitted information, as it does not lead to the degradation of an individual.

Such an ideal model of media may seem at first glance to be a clear and harmful form of utopia, but it is worth noting that multiple attempts were already made to implement it in different totalitarian systems. One might therefore risk stating that

56 H. Albrecht, *Die Religion der Massenmedien*, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln 1993, p. 13.

57 This process seems to be favoured by the phenomenon of 'thinking laziness' related to the informational part of media. According to J. Rudniański, this concept is caused by a passive receiving of large amounts of information. Because of the sheer volume of information, its recipients become unresponsive and they do not attempt to critically evaluate any messages, transferring this passivity to their surrounding world. J. Rudniański, *Homo cogitans*, Warszawa 1975, p. 89 *et seq.*

the essence of totalitarianism is also to solve this kind of ethical dilemmas based on a set of principles (ideological or religious in nature). The lack of faith among the journalists⁵⁸ in the usefulness of ethical codes and journalistic ethics might stem from a simple belief that the Decalogue itself or, relatively, recommendations contained in the Gospel do provide for the optimal solution in situations of conflict relating to the ethical aspects of media operations. Yet, it seems that this belief is somehow unjustified, because the Decalogue and the Gospel provide for a source of certain moral norms which for many people might be unacceptable. One can relate here to the prohibition of perjury or the prohibition to lie (the fracture of which may be actually required by the work of an investigative journalist), or the duty to show respect for the elderly and the tradition, or the solidarity with other journalists⁵⁹. The boundaries of such norms must be clearly defined, mainly because of the numerous violations of journalistic ethics. This determination will vary depending on the position of a given journalist in the wider media system undergoing, as it is known, continuous transformations. The fact that the Decalogue and the Gospel, as a common basis for media morality, can give such broad interpretation possibilities might thus be the reason why many journalists in Poland, so heavily experienced by the totalitarian systems in the past, tend to reject the need for separate ethical standards in their profession as threatening with a return to the totalitarian form of media.

Even if some universally acceptable rules governing the way media influence their recipients were to be found, in practice the implementation of any such principles would be hampered by various interests of the media themselves. Even though the very interests of individual entities in various media structures (owners⁶⁰, publishers and journalists) may indeed coincide, they often differ from each other. And then again, these interests do tend to overlap with the interests of different political parties and advertisers, which will be discussed in the next two chapters.

58 This ethical scepticism probably also applies to other media employees, although there is no data on this subject.

59 These principles are mentioned by C. J. Bertrand, who recognises that they provide for the basis of all codes of journalism. Compare, *Ibid.*, *Deontologia mediów...*, p. 65.

60 In Poland, 80% of the press ownership is in the hands of foreign capital, mainly German. Compare with B. Michalski, *Podstawowe problemy prawa prasowego*, Warszawa 1998, p. 15.