

On Journalistic Ethics [Περί Δημοσιογραφικής Δεοντολογίας]

Giorgos Pavlidis

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The contrast is too stark to remain unnoticed and uncommented on: at a time when journalism is going through a crisis and is being challenged, new and important publications are added to the literature that explores the theory and application of journalism. One of these publications is by the author Giorgos Pavlidis, titled *On Journalistic Ethics*. Its importance is highlighted by the author's work and activities. Apart from his teaching work, Pavlidis is the director of the Institute of Ethics and Public Policy of the Institute for Mass Media, and for many years, he was a member of Cyprus' Journalistic Deontology Board. Pavlidis' experience is reflected throughout the pages of the book and in the mixture of theory and practice that permeates it from beginning to conclusion.

The book is structured in three parts. The first part presents a contemporary theory of journalism for our time. This section is the most interesting. The second part consists of three investigative themes. Two of these have been drawn from recent experience in Cyprus and, as case studies, they both offer a test of the theory and lead to certain conclusions. The first case concerns a much-discussed interview given by singer Notis Sfakianakis to CyBC (PIK, the Cypriot public broadcaster). The second case concerns the coverage of the Helios, 14 August 2005 airplane tragedy by the Cypriot media. The third part includes public speeches and statements by the author regarding issues related to ethics, fake news, self-regulation, etc.

The special contribution of Pavlidis to journalism theory is found in the first part of the book, which consists of six chapters. It focuses on the 'moving target' of ethics, on all that surrounds and guarantees the two rules of journalism: First, report and make nothing up, and, second, trust your reporting.¹

In the first chapter, entitled Force of Authority, the author briefly reviews the impact of the media since the 20th century and to the present day. Two (of the many) highlights:

¹ Schudson, M., *Journalism: Why it Matters* (2020).

- The US bombing of Libya, on 16 April 1986, at a time coinciding with the highest... TV viewership.
- The spread of the Italian billionaire tycoon and politician Silvio Berlusconi's media empire.

If the first event encapsulates the use of the media by political power to secure consensus,² the second condenses the identification of the media with political and economic power. These are changes that fundamentally alter the conditions under which opinion is formed in the public sphere.³ Alongside the above, we can add that social reaction is also often subject to the allure of the image, resulting in Prime Time Activism, as media critics have described Greenpeace's attempt to attract TV media coverage with its inflatable rafts.⁴

From the second chapter, entitled Theory and Practice, we would single out the discussion the author initiates, a discussion on subjectivity and objectivity in reporting the news and/or fake news. Pavlidis, while defending the obligation to report the facts with the greatest possible accuracy, acknowledges at the same time the relativity that accompanies all reporting. For him, 'the observer paints events, he doesn't photograph them. In addition, as is the case with every painter and every artist, the observer-journalist will draw the picture as he perceives it, as he himself experiences it. It is up to him to choose what to put first and what to put second. What to emphasise and what not to emphasise, which hue will dominate' (p. 66).

The third chapter, entitled Dependencies and Incompatibilities, lists all those conflicts that divide journalists and which led the editor-in-chief of the New York Times to the not at all honourable conclusion that 'we are just intellectual prostitutes'.⁵ There are financial dependencies since the media are also businesses and not charities, attempts at bribery, advertising that funds the media, and, finally, three more types of dependencies: political-party, state-national and social relations' dependencies. It is a web of conflicts that permeates the lives of journalists and the media and that has been systematically targeted by codes of conduct and attempts at regulation. The aim each time is to preserve impartiality and integrity to the highest possible degree.

² Herman, E. Chomsky, N., *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

³ Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press, 1991).

⁴ Bolz, N., *Das ABC der Medien* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007).

⁵ Boyer, O. R., *Labor's Untold Story* (1979).

The next three chapters constitute, in our view, the book's greatest contribution to journalism studies in Greece. The fourth chapter examines the self-regulation of media and journalists as a response to the deregulation of the broadcasting landscape and a simultaneous rejection of the arguments and practices of regulation. For the author, choices made by the Greek press, such as its stance in the 2015 Greek referendum, have led to the complete discrediting of press functionaries in the eyes of the citizens. This is evidenced by the very low ranking of Greek media in terms of credibility, indicatively in 36th place among 38 countries,⁶ in the context of international surveys. The author analyses the proposal of the Cyprus Committee on Journalistic Ethics (CCE) for a model of 'regulated self-regulation'. The term is derived from the German model of the operation of broadcasting supervisory authorities. The three pillars on which the CCE's proposal is based are:

- First, self-regulation -journalists decide their own affairs.
- Second, training of journalists and development -submission of their own proposals when there is a breach of ethics.
- Third, legal safeguarding of the Commission's independence.

The next chapter briefly outlines the history of the most important ethics codes and committees that have attempted to preserve the integrity of the profession since the 19th century. The author singles out the Convention of Bordeaux (1954), of Munich (1971), and of *The Washington Post*, that were systematised into a written text in the late 1980s.

The responsibility of journalistic organizations themselves to set ethical boundaries has been repeatedly pointed out in the relevant literature. In one view (of many), since there are no journalism laws, no regulations, no professional licensing, and no formal self-policing, and because journalism by its very nature can provide opportunities for exploitation, the burden falls heavily on the ethics and judgment of each journalist and the organisation in which they work.⁷

G. Pavlidis focuses on the code of journalism at the newspaper that featured in director Steven Spielberg's 2017 film *The Post* because of 'the measures the newspaper is taking to ensure the independence of its journalists. These measures touch on journalists' privacy, their interests, their "beliefs", their connections, and even the

⁶ Reuters Institute & University of Oxford, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019).

⁷ Kovach, B., Rosenstiel, T., *The Elements of Journalism (What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect)* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001).

interests that they and their relatives have. The Code makes it clear from the outset that all reporters and editors are required to inform the head of the press department of any financial interests that may conflict with their journalistic duties or merely create such an impression' (p. 175).

Particularly useful is the brief description the author then gives of the codes of ethics of many European countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Belgium, Germany, etc. Their comparative evaluation brings to the surface weaknesses, strengths, and, more importantly, the need for constant modernisation and renewal of the framework in Greece and Cyprus.

The first part concludes with an examination of the functioning of the Independent Regulatory Authorities in the audiovisual sector in Europe, which started their operation in the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of the privatisation of broadcasting. Since then, with constant technological progress and the convergence of technologies, the scope of regulation has changed dramatically. New areas are also constantly emerging that require regulation, such as copyright, the protection of citizens' privacy, etc. However, within contemporary explorations of journalistic ethics conducted in the quicksand of the last decades' changes, it has been pointed out that 'despite the vagaries of a "most viewed stories" popularity contest, we must honour the fundamental duty to report accurate, fair, substantive and indispensable information while surviving in the marketplace'.⁸

Finally, the author focuses on the Cypriot Regulatory Authority established in 1998 by a law regulating the foundation, establishment, and operation of private radio and television broadcasters in Cyprus.

By stating that the 'news platforms' Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are linked to software giant Microsoft, the author betrays a superficial relationship with developments and competition in the area of Big Tech (Smyrnaioi, 2018).⁹ Its main characteristic is the creation and dominance of an oligopoly often rendered by the acronym GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft). The dominance of this oligopoly is not only associated with aggressive acquisitions and mergers (Instagram and WhatsApp by Facebook, YouTube by Google through its parent Alphabet, etc.), but also with collusion and fierce competition. It is in this environment that the re-

⁸ McBride, K., Rosenstiel, T., *The New Ethics of Journalism – Principles for the 21st Century* (Sage, 2014).

⁹ Smyrnaioi, N., *Internet Oligopoly, The Corporate Takeover of Our Digital World* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018).

cent EU attempt to regulate the digital market by imposing restrictions on Big Tech's activities developed .¹⁰

However, Pavlidis' book condenses years of field experience and examines it through the eyes of an expert under the light of a constantly evolving theory, informed by two directions: The innovations taking place in media news and the progress achieved by ethical philosophy. It is a book that is useful for academics and scientists in the field of journalism, because of its specialisation in the field of deontology and ethics, as well as for journalists and citizens, because it teaches them to become more demanding towards the media. Moreover, the deepening knowledge of citizens and journalists, as similar publications proliferate, is one small contribution that can help overcome the crisis and benefit the journalistic profession.

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¹⁰ Espinoza, J., 'How Big Tech Lost the Antitrust Battle with Europe' *Financial Times* (London, 21 March 2022)