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## Media Ethics —in Search of a Moral Compass

Morality is the foundation of human existence, shaping our attitudes, choices and relationships with the environment. It is a complex construct, resulting from the interaction of many factors, such as values, social norms, life experiences and the influence of culture. Education, both formal education and upbringing in the family or social environment, also plays a key role. It is through this process of shaping morality that individuals acquire the ability to recognize and evaluate behavior as morally right or wrong.<sup>1</sup> Modern society, dominated by the media, provides an extremely important context for the development of individual morality and the formation of social norms. The media play not only an informational role, but also an educational and cultural role. By transmitting content on a variety of topics, they influence our views, attitudes and ways of thinking. This is why media ethics is becoming an indispensable tool for analyzing, evaluating and shaping media content. However, given the dynamic nature of the modern world, where technological advances are constantly redefining the limits of our possibilities and challenges, media ethics must evolve with it. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big

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<sup>1</sup> R. Miszczyński, A. Tarnopolski, *Filozofia a mass media*, „Diametros” nr 4, 2005, 12.

data, are raising new questions and dilemmas about the responsible use of media and the protection of individual privacy and freedom. Accordingly, this article is not intended to merely present a comprehensive concept of media ethics, but rather to provide a preliminary outline of the issues we face in today's world, which is undergoing constant technological development.

Media ethics is an important research area that includes both the creators and recipients of media messages. Its relevance derives from the role the media play in shaping public opinion and forming society. In the context of an increasingly dynamic mediasphere, ethical issues become particularly pressing, requiring the definition of certain universal rules of conduct. The creation and reception of media content should be based on ethical foundations that ensure credibility, respect and trust in communication relationships.<sup>2</sup> However, maintaining neutrality in the media space is becoming increasingly difficult, as objectivity is often difficult to achieve due to the diversity of perspectives and interests. Consequently, the search for a moral compass for media ethics requires recourse to individual values and principles that guide our behavior. The existence of universally recognized ethical standards, supported by appropriate legal regulations, can significantly facilitate decision-making in situations of moral dilemmas.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of general codes of ethics for the media, therefore, would go a long way toward cleaning up the media space and supporting valuable content and communication practices.

This particular research area is extremely complex and encompasses many aspects. The primary goal of media ethics is to understand and analyze moral issues related to the media and to develop ethical principles that guide the actions of both creators and consumers of media content.<sup>4</sup> We can distinguish

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<sup>2</sup> M. Drózdź, *Etyczne aspekty mediów integralną częścią nauk o mediach*, „Studia. Medioznawcze”, nr 4 (55), 2013, 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> G. Tilak, *The study and importance of media ethics*, „International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity”, vol. 11, No. 1 (2020), 450.

four main divisions within which media ethics is implemented.<sup>5</sup> First, media ethics is part of broader social ethics, which examines the moral aspects of media functioning in the context of social and economic structures. This includes an analysis of both ethical norms and regulation of media in the public space. Second, media ethics takes into account the development of new media tools, such as the Internet and communication in cyberspace. Adapting ethical principles to changing technology is crucial to maintaining credibility and accountability in the media. Third, media ethics focuses on the moral principles that should guide media content creators, including journalistic ethics. In this regard, media ethics performs one basic task, namely, to develop

basic ethical principles for the creation and transmission of content, and to provide appropriate ethical reasoning for resolving ethical dilemmas that arise.<sup>6</sup>

Ensuring honesty, integrity and respect in the transmission of information is the foundation of media ethics. Fourth, media ethics also takes into account the role of media audiences, understood as informed and responsible consumers of media content. Respecting their autonomy and ability to think critically is an essential element of this ethical sphere. In order for media ethics to effectively fulfill its role, it must be dynamic and responsive to changes in the media space. In addition, it should be based on general ethical principles that are accepted by society.<sup>7</sup> However, its function does not end with analyzing past events; it is also important to provide tools and strategies to anticipate and prevent ethical situations, thus building a more responsible and reliable mediosphere.

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<sup>5</sup> Drózdź, *Etyczne aspekty mediów integralną częścią nauk o mediach*, 12–13.

<sup>6</sup> Cit. *ibidem*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, 20–21.

The media have always had a huge influence on the formation of public opinion, as editors and publishers have decided which information is “valuable” and is to be conveyed to the public. Although now there are many other media outlets, such as the Internet and television, the same game of constructing a message is still being played. Generally speaking, a given message depends on how it is constructed and passed on.<sup>8</sup> While the media perform the function of providing information and control, equally important are their roles in social debate, enabling participation in public life and shaping social dialogue.<sup>9</sup> All of these functions add up to the media's enormous influence on society, its attitudes, opinions and participation at various levels. The media not only inform and entertain, but also help us interpret reality, which makes their influence on our views and attitudes an extremely debated topic. The question of the media's neutrality and how to protect ourselves from its one-sided influence is therefore extremely important. In addition, the concept of “new media” is becoming increasingly complex and expansive, encompassing an ever-increasing number of tools that not only convey information, but also enable us to communicate, experience and create.<sup>10</sup> “New media” is no longer limited to traditional media, but is also penetrating into areas such as social communication, sociology and art. All of this shows how dynamically the role of the media in our society is changing, and how important it is to adapt media ethics to these changes and understand their impact on our lives.

Taking into account the available definitions of media, the following division can be distinguished:

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<sup>8</sup> J. P. Hudzik, *Filozofia mediów jako Medienphilosophie: ideowe źródła i konteksty*, „Political Dialogues” nr 29, 2020, 157.

<sup>9</sup> K. Nowakowski, *Zagrożenia etyczne i korupcyjne w mediach*, „Studia medioznawcze”, vol. 2, 2017, 127.

<sup>10</sup> M. Laskowska, *New media in the service of man. Outline of issues in the context of media ethics and axiology*, „Practical Theology”, vol. 13, 2012, 124.

„OLD MEDIA” (analog, old, traditional)	„NEW MEDIA” (digital)	„NEW, NEW MEDIA”
Press Radio Film Television Traditional photography	Internet Email Internet forums Internet telephony cell phone (sms, mms) DVD Flash drive e-book Digital library Digital television Computer game Digital photography	Facebook YouTube Google+ Secondo Life Twitter Blog Podcast

Analyzing the table presented, we note how diverse the modern understanding of new media is and how wide their range of functions is. The media not only transmit information, but are also carriers of that content. With the rapid technological development and constant access to information in today's world, we see an increase in the number of tools referred to as “new, new media.” This, in turn, can significantly affect our daily functioning in reality. That's why it's worth considering whether striving to completely cut ourselves off from the real world is really what we should be aiming for. The concept of “new media” is also the subject of much discussion and interpretation, especially in the context of rapid technological development. It encompasses not only traditional media, such as television and the Internet, but also new forms of social communication that expand our ability to interact and experience the world. Accordingly, “new media” is becoming not only a subject of interest in the field of media studies, but also in sociology, social communication or art.

One of the most revolutionary new media has become the Internet, which has provided virtually unlimited access to information without the mediation of traditional editors or publishers. This not only expanded our media awareness, but also contributed to the explosion in the development of information and communication technologies. The Internet has become a place where we can put anything we want. As a result, useful information appears in it, but also information that contains elements that are untrue or are lies in their entirety. Due to the fact that we do not have a general, global and formalized code of ethics that is also used by creators and broadcasters on the Internet, it is difficult to verify the information that appears there. The Internet has become a place where we can contact people on the other side of the world, find out what lava is made of or watch events from, for example, war zones in real time. At the same time, it is a place where there is virtually no control over published content. What's more, it is becoming increasingly popular, the use of artificial intelligence, which, based on our movements on the Internet, "sends" us product advertisements, articles with topics or events we reviewed two weeks earlier.<sup>11</sup> All this has an impact on the formation of public opinion, public discourse, but especially on young people, who currently spend a great deal of time online.

Several consequences of the continued development of the Internet and mass media can be identified. First, the greater and easier accessibility to contact with other people in the world brings not only the benefits of making new friends or learning new languages or cultures. It also makes the need for live contact disappear, which creates room for social isolation to develop.<sup>12</sup> Second, the growth of the Internet and mass media is also contributing to a change in the way people communicate and express themselves. Short forms of communication, such as text mes-

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<sup>11</sup> Miszczyński, Tarnopolski, *Filozofia a mass media*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> S. Juszczak, *Czy cyberprzestrzeń stanowi zagrożenie dla życia społecznego?*, in: *Media a edukacja*, vol. 2, red. W. Strykowski, wyd. eMPi, Poznań 1998, 63–64.

sages or short posts on social media, are becoming the dominant way to convey information. This can lead to a loss of deep thinking skills, as well as a reduced ability to build longer and more complex interpersonal relationships. Third, easy access to the Internet and social media means that people are increasingly communicating remotely, through text messages, video calls or social media. This can lead to the disappearance of the need for in-person contact, which in turn can affect the quality of interpersonal relationships and the ability to communicate empathetically.

The new media have not only opened up new opportunities for creators and audiences, but have also created room for the emergence of even newer forms of media, where anyone can become a journalist or broadcaster of information. With this transformation, the ethical scope of the media has also expanded. It no longer only applies to professional journalists or news outlets, but also includes anyone who interacts with the media, uploading content online (often) without thinking. As a result, it becomes important to look for universal and understandable moral principles to guide our decisions about publishing content online. Such guidelines should be available to all and serve as a moral compass for every participant in the media ecosystem. Social media and the Internet, whose growth and pervasiveness are constantly changing the way we connect to information, are important tools for global communication.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, they enable us to get to know and keep in touch with people of different interests and cultures, and on the other hand, they carry certain risks, especially in the context of the phenomenon of “online hegemony,” exclusion, or the spread of misinformation. This makes the question of ethics in the media particularly important, since it concerns not only the creators of media content, but also each of us, as Internet users.

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<sup>13</sup> D. Kaznowski, *Podział i klasyfikacja social media*, Networked Digital, 2010: <http://networkeddigital.com/2010/05/10/podzial-i-klasyfikacja-social-media> (13.05.2024).

In a world where anyone can become a content sender, it is crucial to have a moral compass that helps us make responsible decisions online. Social media, as a place where we share opinions, participate in discussions and build relationships, requires us to reflect on the ethical aspects of our actions. As we realize that our online conduct can have real consequences for us and others, we need universal moral principles to guide us both in the real world and in the online space. With generally accepted ethical guidelines, we will be more aware of the consequences of our online actions, which can reduce the risk of exposing ourselves to negative consequences, such as hectoring or exclusion. It is important to shape an Internet culture based on respect, empathy and responsibility for published content.<sup>14</sup> Only then will we be able to enjoy the benefits of social media while minimizing the negative aspects of its use.

Technological developments and the modern world's desire for constant contact with information are leading to an increase in the importance of "new, new media," which has a direct impact on our daily functioning in the real world. However, with these changes, it is worth considering whether we really want and should strive to "log off" from reality altogether. The term "mass media" emerged in the 20th century, with the rapid development of television and the dawn of the Internet age. However, defining the term remains open, as constant social and technological changes can bring new forms of communication, additional tools and transform existing ones. "Mass media," first and foremost, allows the transmission of information in real time to a wide audience, without the need for special receivers. However, the essence of "mass media" is not only the technology by which we transmit information, but primarily its widespread availability and the huge number of messages that are directed to us.<sup>15</sup> Often these messages are chaotic, unverifiable, and sometimes have lit-

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<sup>14</sup> Laskowska, *Nowe media w służbie człowieka*, 132.

<sup>15</sup> T. Goban-Klas, *Pochwała medioznawstwa, czyli renesans McLuhana*, „Studia Medioznawcze” nr 1, 2000, 11.



the intellectual value. Consequently, information overload and excess can lead to the phenomenon of overstimulation. An undeniable role in this process is played not only by words, but also by images, which are processed by the audience in a much more efficient way.<sup>16</sup> Here you can also see a certain moral dilemma that arises in such a case. Should the news be edited or changed, in any way? Or should they, however, present a true, unaltered picture of a given situation?

Mass media are, as it were, the result and one of the tools of globalization. With their help we can find out what is happening on the other side of the world, and it is no longer related to watching a daily newspaper at a fixed time of day or listening to the news on the radio. The Internet has given us tremendous opportunities as to what to communicate right now, at any given moment, which also translates into building and influencing public opinion. Currently, it is increasingly pointed out that the Internet is ceasing to be a source of information and is becoming a place similar to a marketplace, where the only thing that matters is what a given broadcaster clicks on, reads, buys, pays attention to, and so on. For this reason, as noted earlier, artificial intelligence is being used to help determine for broadcasters, advertisers, what, where and when they should post to arouse the interest of the viewer.<sup>17</sup> In this case, you can see, the so-called manipulation of information, which refers to

the shaping of views, attitudes, behavior or emotions without a person's knowledge or will.<sup>18</sup>

Due to the continuous development of the media and the fact that currently any of us can become a “journalist”, it is worth considering what consequences this may bring. In general, the pro-

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<sup>16</sup> Miszczyński, Tarnopolski, *Filozofia a mass media*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Cit. W. Babik, *O manipulowaniu informacją w prywatnej i publicznej przestrzeni informacyjnej*, „Człowiek, media, edukacja”, 2011, 11.

profession of journalist does not require any certification, even after graduating from a journalism degree, one does not receive a special license to practice this profession, as, for example, in the case of a lawyer or doctor.<sup>19</sup> This profession belongs to the so-called “open pool” of professions, so we need virtually no papers to practice it. This, on the other hand, is connected with the fact that most of the information that is published outside the traditional sources of information (radio, television, newspapers) may not be verified in any way. Due to constant technological development, we see new forms of journalism or people creating media messages being created at every turn. These individuals may promote and emphasize different values than were previously common among the public.

Therefore, new elements are emerging that should make up the principles of journalistic ethics and, consequently, the framing of all media ethics. This is primarily due to two main trends that can be observed. First, the emergence and spread of “new” news media, which function mainly from the Internet area. However, traditional media are not disappearing, so we can talk about the so-called mixed news media. In recent years, the number of people using the media and publishing information has increased significantly. Even in newspapers there are articles that are not written by professionals or journalists, but by people who have simply become famous for something and become authorities in their fields. This is also one of the manifestations of mixed news media. Namely, it's not just that we have available, in addition to radio and newspapers, the Internet, or social media, but that the area of information, journalism can actually be created by anyone. Secondly, globalization provides the basis for obtaining and delivering information all over the world, regardless of changes in time zones, culture and language. The news media currently have a global reach, because they have such tools, and thus influence the formation of public opinion to a greater extent.<sup>20</sup> They are not, as

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<sup>19</sup> Nowakowski, *Zagrożenia etyczne i korupcyjne w mediach*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> S. J. A. Ward, *Radical media ethics. Ethics for a global digital world*, „Digital Journalism” nr 2 (4), 2014, 456–457.

in earlier years, confined to the area of one district, city or country, but are delivered globally, so any of us can use them and find out, for example, what the political situation in China really is. However, the globalization of the media has its pros and cons. The plus side is that in case there is a natural disaster in a poor country thousands of kilometers away from us, first of all we know in general that such a situation has occurred. Secondly, we can respond to it and help the people facing it. The downside may be that the current situation in a country may, for example, cause protests and riots in another country.

When analyzing changes in the media sphere, it is impossible to ignore the growing danger of unverified content and fake news, which are increasingly rampant online. With the dominance of sensationalist elements in social media, there is a risk that this type of material can do more harm than good. In such a situation, it becomes crucial to be guided by an internal code of ethics, which allows us to assess whether a given piece of information should be shared. Unfortunately, in the rush for “likes” and attention from other Internet users, we often lose sight of our moral compass, succumbing to selfish temptations.<sup>21</sup> This, in turn, leads to reflections on the validity and relevance of traditional codes of ethics in the face of the digital revolution. Thus, there is a kind of transition from traditional journalistic ethics to the new digital reality, where the role of the broadcaster becomes available to everyone, not just professionals.<sup>22</sup>

When analyzing media ethics, there are several key points that should guide media makers. First and foremost, accountability is the foundation of their operation—providing accurate, honest and reliable information to the public is their primary duty. Those who abuse the power of the media or who lie about reality for personal gain should be held accountable. In addition, it is important to respect the principle of press freedom, but at the same time media ethics should set the framework for the use of information.

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<sup>21</sup> Hudzik, *Filozofia mediów jako Medienphilosophie*, 157.

<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Radical media ethics*, 456.

Media independence is another key element—they should be free to express their opinions, as long as they are not subordinated to selfish motives. It is also important for news makers to maintain impartiality and neutrality, and to promote positive social attitudes and cultural heritage, abandon hate speech, etc.<sup>23</sup> All these aspects form the foundation of media ethics and should be taken into account in the daily work of the media.

When considering media ethics, there are many aspects to consider that relate to the work of a journalist and the principles that should guide information creators. Professional journalists have always been expected to present information objectively and fairly, in accordance with the truth.<sup>24</sup> To date, codes of ethics have mainly applied to this professional group, which works for established television, radio or newspaper stations. However, the rise of digital media has significantly affected this landscape, undermining previous ethical principles.<sup>25</sup> A number of codes of ethics, both national and international, have been developed in response to emerging ethical issues in the journalism profession. One example is the Media Ethics Charter, which was developed in 1995 by the Association of Polish Journalists. However, there is a challenge in adapting ethical principles to the rapidly changing technological reality, especially in the context of invasion of privacy, manipulation, or problems with objectivity.<sup>26</sup> A key task for the media is to develop ethical principles that are appropriate in every situation. It is difficult to anticipate all potential problems, especially in such a rapidly developing area. With the fact that anyone can now post information online, it is important that everyone be aware of the consequences of their actions online. That's why it's a good idea to establish general moral rules that apply to everyone, regardless of culture, religion or country of origin.

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<sup>23</sup> Tilak, *The study and importance of media ethics*, 457–458.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 450.

<sup>25</sup> Ward, *Radical media ethics*, 458–459.

<sup>26</sup> Nowakowski, *Zagrożenia etyczne i korupcyjne w mediach*, 130.

Media codes of ethics should be updated and adapted to the ever-changing situation, because the media revolution is not only responsible for the development of digital technology, but also for changing the relationship between broadcasters and audiences. This relationship up to now, functioning on the principle: journalist—medium of communication—society, is still changing.<sup>27</sup> It can be noted that currently the category of “journalist” has undergone a significant change, because a journalist can now be anyone, not only a professional person who informs the public about current situations, but also amateur writers, non-governmental agencies running websites, bloggers, influencers and so on. The second part, or “medium of communication,” has also undergone a significant change, as it no longer includes only traditional media, but also those operating online and to which we have access at any time of the day. Let's note that also the third core has changed, i.e. the public, which is no longer a passive recipient of what journalists deliver to them. The public now takes an active role in creating, transmitting and evaluating the content that is provided to them.

The media are created by people, which is why it is so difficult to establish a single universally applicable code of ethics for news broadcasters to follow. As already noted, media ethics cannot apply only to journalists or editors. Media ethics should apply to all people, because it is people who make up the modern media. Sometimes we encounter the fact that a particular TV station, newspaper, website is directed at one political party and therefore publishes only such information that can benefit it and harm its opponents. This is because the media are people, and people mostly follow the same ethical principles at work and in their private lives.<sup>28</sup>

When discussing media ethics and its universality, it is worth focusing on ways to shape and adapt ethical principles to the ever-changing reality. Nowadays, the media is no longer just tra-

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<sup>27</sup> Ward, *Radical media ethics*, 460–461.

<sup>28</sup> Por. Tilak, *The study and importance of media ethics*, 456.

ditional media, such as the press or television, but also each of us with the ability to share information in public spaces. Therefore, an important aspect of media ethics is the constant adaptation of ethical principles to the dynamic nature of the media. Nevertheless, the challenge is to create universal principles that take into account the diversity of ethical attitudes in society and can anticipate and respond to situations related to the development of the media.<sup>29</sup> Media codes of ethics should be constantly updated and adapted to the changing situation, as the media revolution is changing not only technology, but also the relationship between broadcasters and audiences. Nowadays, anyone can be a journalist, and the media includes not only traditional forms, but also those operating online, available at any time of the day. Also, the public is no longer just a viewer, but actively participates in the creation, transmission and evaluation of content. For these reasons, it is difficult to establish a universally applicable code of ethics for the media that would be followed by all broadcasters of information. As for media ethics and its universality, we should first of all consider how to shape it and adapt it to the ever-changing world.

As noted earlier, currently the media, is not just the press or television, but practically all of us, since almost all of us have the ability to post information and other content in the public space. Therefore, the role of media ethics should be to create and, at the same time, constantly update ethical principles that would respond to the constant changes taking place in this space.<sup>30</sup> However, it is worth noting that the difficulty of constructing a generally accepted assumption of media ethics is due to the multiplicity and diversity of ethical attitudes found in societies. Therefore, numerous moral dilemmas may arise, which will be related to the culture and society in which they occur.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 457–458.

<sup>30</sup> C. G. Christians, S. Rao, S. J. A. Ward, H. Wasserman, *Toward a Global Media Ethics: Theoretical Perspectives*, „*Ecquid Novi*” 2008, 29:2, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Drózdź, *Etyczne aspekty mediów*, 23.

Therefore, the search for a kind of guide on how to act in the media space should be determined primarily by our individual ethical attitudes that guide us in life. In the situation outlined, it may seem that the best solution to the constant changes that the profession of journalism, the media and the audiences that have become broadcasters at the same time are undergoing is to construct and stick to our own ethical principles, which would correspond to the generally accepted ethical norms in society. They should be consistent with our values, worldview and understanding of what is included in the area of journalistic integrity. For this reason, we can speak here of a certain personalization of media ethics guidelines. This personalization will consist precisely in the formulation of our own personalized ethical guidelines, which would be a certain consensus between what an ever-developing and more conscious society expects and how a media broadcaster should behave in the modern world.<sup>32</sup> However, this proposal for a kind of “moral compass” is only a proposal, and one that should nevertheless be based on generally accepted moral principles such as telling the truth, keeping promises, remaining objective and trying to be reliable and accurate.

Media ethics does not apply only to journalists or editors, but should include everyone, since it is people who make the media. Sometimes the media can be oriented toward one political party or group interest, leading to the publication of one-sided information. Therefore, proper media ethics should be based on objective values and ethical norms to protect both broadcasters and viewers of media content from the negative effects of such targeting. In this vision, media ethics serves as a moral guide that influences both choices and actions in the media space, as well as in society. Its task is to eliminate or minimize conflicts that may arise in the context of media development and its impact on society.

In conclusion, the article was aimed at a deeper understanding of the problems faced by contemporary media ethics in the

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<sup>32</sup> Ward, *Radical media ethics*, 464.

context of the dynamic development of the media space. It is apparent that the traditional approach to media ethics and journalistic objectivity has not kept pace with the changes taking place in today's media, where anyone can become a broadcaster. The relationship between the broadcaster and the viewer has been transformed, resulting in the creation of media based on personal experiences and subjective opinions. In view of this, it is necessary to adapt existing codes of ethics to the new media reality, taking into account both the perspective of professional journalists and media participants. Thus, media ethics should be based on the individual ethical codes of each person, creating a kind of "moral compass" suitable for modern media. Moreover, to be effective, media ethics must be global, touching every digital media user. Only in this way will it be possible to create principles that are relevant and adapted to the modern era, and that respond to the challenges posed by modern media. ■

### Media Ethics—in Search of a Moral Compass

#### SUMMARY

This article delves into the intricate interplay between morality and modern media, highlighting how education, societal norms, and cultural influences shape individual ethical perspectives. It underscores the pivotal role of media ethics in analyzing and guiding media content creation, especially in light of technological advancements like AI and big data. The evolving media landscape calls for a reevaluation of traditional ethics frameworks to encompass the democratization of broadcasting and the proliferation of subjective viewpoints. A call is made for personalized ethical codes, serving as moral compasses in the digital age, with a global reach to address contemporary media challenges effectively.

**Keywords:** media ethics, mass media, new media, ethics, Internet



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