Few treatments of media ethics are historical, and what history they do include tends to be anecdotal and not to stretch further back than a generation. This paucity is sometimes due to the urgency in media ethics. There are so many pressing issues to cover and so little time to examine them—one ethics course in college, perhaps, or part of a reporting course, a professional seminar, maybe one book. The stakes are large and there are so many pitfalls that taking time to consider the history of media ethics can seem like an academic indulgence. There is also a sense of outrage in media ethics. Information that the public needs is hidden or corrupted; reputations that have taken a lifetime to build are destroyed with a few keystrokes. Much that falls under the rubric of media ethics is written in the white heat of the moment. Media ethics seems to call for passion and incisiveness, not history.

Nevertheless, an accurate understanding of the moral dimensions of media requires history. By showing the challenges that others have faced, the responses that others have considered, and the choices that others have made, history can help media ethics to evaluate possible actions and policies. A history of media ethics can provide a comprehensive view of moral victories and defeats and the circumstances that led to them. As elaborated in this “Short History of Media Ethics in the United States,” like cross-cultural studies, history provides comparisons with other situations that can illuminate our own.

How American media behave has been a concern since 1638 when the first printing press arrived in the colonies. The press carried with it both promise and threat. Its primary purpose was religious enlightenment and edification for colonists as well as Native Americans—in just 25 years the Bible was available not only in English but also in the native Algonquin language—but the press also facilitated legal and business transactions, supported education, and provided colonists with news from Europe and other colonies. Because it could generate discussion and settle disputes, the colonists understood the press to be an agent of truth, both in the narrow sense of factuality and in the wider sense of ultimate and eternal reality.

The colonists also understood that circulating misstatements of fact and faith could cause religious doubt, moral waywardness, and political dissent, so they kept careful watch over the press. In 1689, the governor of Massachusetts complained that “many papers have beene lately printed and dispersed tending to the disturbance of the peace and subversion of the government” (Williams, 2005, p. 24). And a year later, the first colonial newspaper, Publick Occurrences, Both
Forreign and Domestick, was shut down after one issue because its report that Indian allies of the British had abused French prisoners was considered seditious and its report that the king of France had seduced his daughter-in-law was considered vulgar. Few printing presses were in the colonies by 1690, but already disagreements had emerged over their relationship with religious and political authorities and over standards of decorum and privacy. How much latitude the media should have has been the subject of media criticism, and by implication media ethics, ever since.

Moral practices and standards evolved through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as journalism very slowly took on the characteristics of a profession. As Hazel Dicken-Garcia (1989) explains, until the 1830s the American press operated according to a political model. This era was one of political experimentation, when the party system was taking shape. Oriented to political parties and elites, the press during this era was idea-centered. Critics of the press focused on issues of impartiality, questioning whether equal treatment of opposing parties was desirable.

After the introduction of the penny press and the telegraph in the middle years of the century, the press shifted to an information model, becoming event-centered and oriented more to ordinary individuals than to elites and political parties. The United States experienced advances in transportation and manufacturing as well as commercial and political reforms in its cities. Critics became concerned with the press’s watchdog function and what the public had a right to know; they worried that newspaper space was a scarce resource too often squandered on the trivialities of gossip and personal information.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as the nation’s economy shifted from agriculture to industry and Americans became preoccupied with science and business, the press began to adopt a business model. Oriented to consumers of news, the press added drama to what had become its traditional role of presenting ideas and reporting events. Critics after the Civil War increasingly assumed that news was separate from opinion, public service superseded profit, poor taste had no place in newspapers, and privacy deserved protection. The business-oriented press came to believe that there was no market for controversial ideas, but that their customers had boundless desire for sensationalism.

Although Americans have voiced concern about media conduct and content ever since colonial times, critics did not begin to think of what they were doing in terms of ethics until the 1890s. In this sense, media ethics began in the Progressive Era. The sustained ethical evaluation of the Progressive Era was followed by three periods of ferment: demonstrations of professionalism in the 1920s; the forceful definition of the long-used, but ambiguous concept of social responsibility after 1947; and growing interest in normative theory and ethical universals since the 1970s. Taken together, these four periods of media ethics history—Progressive Era, professionalism, social responsibility, and global humanitarianism—have transformed public concerns about journalism into systematic reflection and practical applications.

PROGRESSIVE ERA CRITICISM

Press criticism began to be conceived in terms of ethics at the end of the nineteenth century. Ethics as a term appeared occasionally in discussions about journalism in the 1850s, but the first article to use the word “ethics” in its title was “The Ethics of Journalism” by Catholic writer William Samuel Lilly, whose 1889 article in The Forum became a chapter in his book On Right and Wrong along with other chapters on the ethics of art, marriage, politics, property, and punishment. Lilly argued that journalists were granted freedom of the press in order “to state facts, to argue upon them, to denounce abuses, to advocate reforms,” but that “truth is the last thing the average journalist thinks about” (Lilly, 1892, pp. 165, 167). Including journalism in discussions of ethics signaled
journalism’s increasing importance. In the context of the 1890s, it also meant that journalism was considered a deeply flawed institution and set of practices that required serious analysis.

Critics of the press in the 1890s complained about two major problems: sensationalism and dishonesty. Critics denounced newspapers that pandered to mass readership by filling their columns with personal scandals and gruesome accounts of prizefights, murders, arsons, and suicides. Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* published grizzly accounts of executions and obsessed about prostitution. The *World*’s chief rival, William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*, sent a reporter to conduct a jailbreak in Havana and even advocated the assassination of President William McKinley by editorializing, “Institutions, like men, will last until they die; and if bad institutions and bad men can be got rid of only by killing, then the killing must be done” (Mott, 1941, p. 541). A Philadelphia rabbi complained,

> Judging from the daily amount of social sewage that is allowed to stream in open sight, through the newspaper, one is often tempted to believe that newspaper proprietors must think that people commit crime solely for the purpose of filling the columns of the press.

(“Mission,” 1897, p. 24)

Besides sensationalism, the greatest problem that critics addressed was dishonesty. The *New York Times* complained that Hearst correspondents covering the Spanish-American War falsely reported that Cubans decapitated Spanish prisoners. *Guntan’s Magazine* exposed *The Boston Herald*’s report of big business laying to waste ten industries in Kearney, Nebraska, as a fabrication designed to promote the newspaper’s anti-trust cause. *The Nation* illustrated the unreliability of newspaper reports by comparing three reviews of a theater performance: One reported nearly every seat in the orchestra and the balcony full, another had the lower floor full along with three or four rows in the first balcony, and the third review described the theater as only one-third full. Indeed, making up information or exaggerating stories for effect was so common that Edwin L. Shuman’s 1894 journalism textbook devoted a chapter to proper faking. “Truth in essentials, imagination in non-essentials, is considered a legitimate rule of action in every office,” Shuman explained. “The paramount object is to make an interesting story” (p. 123).

Observers pinned the blame for the sensationalism and the untruths common to the press on greed and public prurience. Whether true or false, scandal sold. “The mercantile spirit of the day is to blame for what is actually pernicious in our newspapers,” said a Universalist minister (“Two sorts,” 1897, p. 2). A variant on this theme was the idea that the problem was keen competition, not profit as such. Although competition for circulation did lead to lower prices and more print, it also fostered sensationalism. Journalist Will Irwin said that yellow journalism spread like “a prairie fire” to “nineteen out of twenty metropolitan newspapers” (Campbell, 2001, p. 51).

Closely related to profit-mongering was the prudence of the public. After all, it was the public that was making yellow journalism profitable. “It is because the people love sensationalism that so much of it is furnished,” said one critic. “The demand regulates the supply” (Wright, 1898, p. 272). Yellow journalism was a problem of more than just the poor and uncultivated, or as one writer said, “the lower order of mankind,” because the middle classes also indulged themselves (“Pernicious,” 1898, p. 5). According to historian Joseph Campbell, “The yellow press was doubtless read across the urban social strata in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century” (2001, p. 55). The public hunger for daily newspapers—both sensational and staid—is illustrated by penetration figures from the time. In 1890, two daily newspapers were printed for every three households in the country; ten years later there was one per household. Critics understood press reform to be more than social work among the poor; it was a process of fighting the deterioration of the entire culture.
Journalism of the 1890s was criticized for the negative effects it seemed to have on readers’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Rollo Ogden, who would eventually edit the *New York Times*, wrote that daily contemplation of crime deadened the sense of revulsion to criminal activity, provided the dull-witted with ideas that they could not have conceived on their own, and nudged into action those with criminal tendencies. An article entitled “The Psychology of Crime” argued similarly, saying that regular reading of unwholesome material, especially by impressionable young people, could lead to “murders, suicides, sexual immoralities, thefts, and numberless other disorders” (Wood, 1893, p. 530). Indeed, everyone was vulnerable: details of sensualities and crimes impressed people’s minds, corrupted wholesome thinking and, inevitably, character.

Such claims seemed to be confirmed by suicides that followed the publication of “Is Suicide a Sin?” by the famous agnostic Robert G. Ingersoll in Pulitzer’s *New York World*. Ingersoll’s attack on laws that punished would-be suicides asked, “When life is of no value to him, when he can be of no real assistance to others, why should a man continue?” (1908, p. 376). Some readers apparently took Ingersoll at his word, including Julius Marcus and Juliette Fournier, who ended their three-month extramarital affair in Central Park with a double suicide. A public outcry followed the revelation that police had found Ingersoll’s column on suicide in Marcus’s pocket, including a condemnation from the New York Minister’s Association:

> Detailed accounts of suicides are not only obnoxious to all but the morbid, but are among the potent causes of the alarming increase of self-murder, especially when communications extenuating and even advocating it are sought and exploited as a means of increasing circulation. (“The duty,” 1897, p. 12)

If immoralities and crimes resulted from the press’s profit motive and the public’s prurience, then the correctives seemed clear: Limit the profits that newspapers could make from sensationalism and dampen the public’s appetite for titillation by changing the basis on which newspapers operated. One common proposal for diminishing the profit motive was to fund newspapers through endowments. Unlike profit-motivated newspapers tempted to pander for circulation by resorting to sex and crime reporting, endowed newspapers could afford to publish solely from conscience. Indeed, steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie announced that he would be willing to endow a newspaper if nine other volunteers helped him, but none was forthcoming. Nobody endowed a newspaper.

Others advocated moral and economic pressure. A letter to the editor of the *New York Times* proposed having thousands of people wear for a period of thirty days some distinguishing badge, ribbon or button as a silent protest against new journalism, which would so shame the readers of yellow newspapers … that they would as lief fondle a mad dog as they would be seen reading these papers.

> (“Yellow journalism,” 1898, p. 6)

But no such public protest ever materialized. Other writers declared that the yellow press would be crippled if moral businesspeople ended their patronage of offensive newspapers and advertised only in respectable publications. No such strategic advertising was ever coordinated. In 1896 reformers called for a boycott of *The New York Journal* and *World* because of their sex and crime stories, but the boycott fizzled.

These solutions failed because consumers enjoyed yellow journalism. Said one contemporary, “The newspaper is just what the public wants it to be” (“Ethics,” 1897, p. 2). Recognizing that yellow journalism flourished because people wanted to read it, some critics recommended
measures to refine the public’s taste. Shifting the focus of media reform from production to consumption, they suggested educating the public through essays, lectures, and college courses. But as hard as changing the press proved to be, it was even harder to convince the public that its taste in newspapers was poor. No media literacy movement emerged.

Although press criticism in the Progressive Era was piecemeal rather than systematic, taken as a whole it comprised a common-sense utilitarianism. Not that the criticism was expressed in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number—but evaluating the press according to the effects that it had upon its consumers, rather than according to its character or its intentions or the nature of its actions, was a sort of utilitarian measurement. Needless to say, the effects were always posited rather than proven, so however thought-provoking such consequentialism may have been, it failed to stimulate any serious improvements in the press. Reform would come from within journalism in the form of professional codes of ethics and higher education.

PROFESSIONALISM

Daily newspapers were wildly popular in the early decades of the twentieth century. Increases in circulation dwarfed population growth from 1900 to 1930, daily newspaper circulation growing 260 percent as the population grew only 62 percent. Daily newspapers reported information faster, more factually, and more comprehensively than ever before, and the tabloids attracted readers with breezy prose, abundant photographs, and titillating stories of sex and crime. But the press’s popularity was accompanied by complaints that news was too often false, suppressed, biased, or indecent. Acknowledging its moral lapses, the press moved to show the public that it was serious about improving practices by bolstering professional training and enacting codes of ethics.

In 1900, The Journalist declared that college-educated journalists wrote better, thought more broadly, and were more ethical than their colleagues from the school of hard knocks. The trade journal’s observations reflected the era’s professionalization. Joseph Pulitzer, the publisher of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and New York World who donated $2 million to endow the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in 1910, believed that ethics was central to journalism education. “I desire to assist in attracting to this profession young men of character and ability, also to help those already engaged in the profession to acquire the highest moral and intellectual training,” he explained. “There will naturally be a course in ethics, but training in ethical principles must not be confined to that. It must pervade all the courses” (O’Dell, 1935, p. 107). By 1915, journalism ethics courses were being taught at Indiana, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington, and other universities were incorporating ethics in their courses on journalism history and law. This focus on ethics in journalism education continued through the 1920s. In his pioneering 1924 textbook, The Ethics of Journalism, Nelson Crawford noted that twenty U.S. institutions offered journalism degrees and that 200 others offered some journalism instruction in an effort to foster “integrity, intelligence and objective-mindedness” (p. 170).

To meet the growing demand for reporters who were ethically sensitive as well as technically proficient, significant works on journalistic ethics were published during this era. Exhibiting what Clifford Christians calls “a dogged preoccupation with public obligation” (2000, p. 22), these works expounded upon what individual newspapers and professional associations had codified. Privileges were no longer taken for granted, sensationalism was dismissed as an excess from the past, and accuracy became the sine qua non of journalistic professionalism. The first books on journalism ethics in the United States were The Ethics of Journalism by Nelson Crawford of
Kansas State University (1924) and *The Morals of Newspaper Making* by Thomas A. Lahey of the University of Notre Dame (1924). These books appeared at the same time the first journalism textbook to include a chapter on ethics appeared: *The Principles of Journalism* by Casper S. Yost, editor of *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (1924). Other books appeared in rapid succession: *The Conscience of the Newspaper* by Leon Flint of the University of Kansas (1925), *Newspaper Ethics* by William Gibbons of Pennsylvania State University (1926), and *The Newspaper and Responsibility* by Paul F. Doughlass of the University of Cincinnati (1929). After *Ethics and Practices in Journalism* by Albert Henning of Southern Methodist University was published in 1932, the word “ethics” disappeared from titles of books about the media until 1975, when John Merrill of the University of Missouri and Ralph Barney of Brigham Young University published a book of readings entitled *Ethics and the Press*.

Codes of ethics were a primary means that journalists in the early twentieth century used to answer their critics and to articulate their best practices. The first code of ethics for journalists was adopted in 1910 by the Kansas Editorial Association. Written by William E. Miller, the Kansas code called for advertising policies that were forthright and fair and for news that was honest, just, and decent. The admonishments were specific, advising that “all advertising should be paid for in cash,” for instance, and that “no reporter should be retained who accepts any courtesies, unusual favors, opportunities for self-gain, or side employment from any factors whose interests would be affected by the manner in which his reports are made” (Miller, 1922, pp. 287, 293–294). Following the lead of the Kansas Editorial Association, numerous state press associations as well as individual newspapers adopted codes of ethics during the 1910s and 1920s.

The codes and creeds would not be limited to newspapers and state press associations. In 1923, the Canons of Journalism were adopted at the inaugural meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the culmination of Casper Yost’s decade-long dream of an ethical organization of newspaper editors. The virtues of responsibility, freedom, independence, honesty, accuracy, impartiality, fair play, and decency that the Canons of Journalism championed summarized the ideals of journalism so well that the Society of Professional Journalists adopted the Canons in 1926, and other newspapers and press associations used the Canons as a model for the codes they would write.

Just as public criticism motivated journalists to write codes of ethics, government regulation motivated the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) to create one of its own. Written in 1928, the Radio Code was created to minimize the involvement of the Federal Radio Commission, established by Congress the year before to ensure that broadcasting took place in the “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” Originally consisting of unenforceable platitudes, the Radio Code grew more specific with every revision, so that the 22nd edition in 1980 was a booklet 31 pages long. The Radio and Television Codes related to advertising and program content, but adherence was voluntary and noncompliance went unpunished. In 1963, for instance, the Federal Communications Commission discovered that 40 percent of television stations exceeded the time limits for advertising set forth in the Television Code. The codes did have some impact, though, because the advertisements that television and radio stations broadcast were usually designed with NAB Code standards in mind.

Although usually written with good intentions, ethics codes have been neither universally welcome nor effective. Stanley Walker, city editor of *The New York Herald Tribune*, dismissed ethics codes as unrealistic. “Not a bad thing, this eternal seeking for sanctification,” he wrote.

There is, it may be, some hope for any reprobate who is capable of turning his head on his pillow and asking: ‘Why do I have to be so rotten?’ But the next day comes the avalanche of reality. There are compromises. It was always so. The saving law is: We do the best we can—in the circumstances.

(1934, p. 176)
Walker’s dismissal of codes as impractical and unenforceable seemed to be borne out shortly after ASNE adopted the Canons of Journalism. Several ASNE members recommended expelling Fred Bonfils, co-owner of *The Denver Post*, for violating the Canons by accepting bribes to suppress information about the Teapot Dome scandal, but in 1929 the membership voted that following the Canons was strictly voluntary. Blackmail may have been wrong, but violators could not be punished by the ASNE or any other journalism society’s code. Their codes of ethics were hortatory only.

The viability of media codes would become questionable toward the end of the century. In 1979, the U.S. Justice Department claimed that the NAB’s Television Code violated antitrust laws, saying that limits on the amount of time for commercials per hour, on the number of commercial interruptions per hour, and on the number of products per commercial harmed both advertisers and consumers by raising the price of broadcasting time unnecessarily. The NAB responded by eliminating its codes. Code enforcement would arise again as an issue in the mid-1980s, when news organizations began to fear that written codes of ethics could be used against them by libel plaintiffs claiming that reporters recklessly disregarded journalistic standards. This fear had a chilling effect on journalistic codes of ethics. After 1987, when the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) stopped asking its members to censure reporters who violated the SPJ code, most code activity in journalism moved quietly to the privacy of individual newsrooms.

After all of the codes and the chapters and the books of journalism ethics were written in the 1920s, concern for ethics was replaced by a concern for objectivity. In the minds of many at the time, ethics books and journalistic canons were seen as means of ridding journalism of its more outrageous practices. Journalism ethics became synonymous with culling values from the facts of human experience so that reporters could produce news that was neutral, unbiased, factual. Journalistic objectivity became a set of skills that could be learned and practiced. Failure to report objectively was the result of poor training or of clever public relations or propaganda. But this faith in scientific objectivity began to be shaken in the 1960s, when science itself was beginning to be explained in terms of paradigms rather than simple progress. Although the term would continue to be used, “objectivity” came to mean accuracy and fairness. *Time* publisher James Shepley explained the difference:

> We know that the truth is based on an interplay between fact and opinion, and that the two are inextricable. We always try to see to it that our facts are selected through balanced judgment, that our judgments are supported by reliable facts… It is a fallible process; but it is open, and always subject to inspection, correction and improvement. We think it is the best process available not only for describing events but for making clear their meaning.

(1968, p. 17)

As the doctrine of objectivity waned, the study of media ethics reappeared.

### SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Concern for freedom of the press was on the mind of Henry Luce, publisher of *Time* magazine, after World War II. The experience of wartime censorship was fresh. Shortly after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Censorship, which issued a code of wartime practices for the press at home to follow and required correspondents abroad to submit their articles and photographs to military censors. Under the Espionage Act, some publishers lost their second-class mailing permits and a few others were indicted, but the press was
mostly compliant, censoring itself as it did when it withheld news of plans for the Allied invasion of North Africa in 1942 and the development of the atomic bomb. For Henry Luce, wartime censorship became personal when British Customs detained his wife, Clare Booth Luce, in Trinidad for reporting about Allied weaknesses in Libya.

There were other pressing concerns for media owners such as Luce. Worried about the power of the increasingly concentrated media, the federal government had begun to break up large media companies in an effort to diversify ownership and perspective. In 1940, the Justice Department issued a consent decree to major movie studios to increase competition within a tightly controlled film and theater industry. Three years later, the courts backed the Federal Communications Commission’s order for RCA to sell one of its two NBC networks. Not only did Luce own a 12.5 percent interest in NBC’s Blue Network, but he also owned *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, *The March of Time* radio program and film series, and the radio news show *Time Views the News*. Because *Time*, Inc. could easily reach a third of all Americans, Luce’s empire was the type of powerful media corporation that the government had begun to investigate. As Luce’s friend Robert M. Hutchins would later say, “Mr. Luce and his magazines have more effect on the American character than the whole educational system put together” (Swanberg, 1972, p. 479).

Worried that press freedoms were in jeopardy, Luce turned to Hutchins, then the chancellor of the University of Chicago, who invited a dozen renowned intellectuals including Zechariah Chafee, Harold Lasswell, Archibald MacLeish, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Arthur Schlesinger to form a Commission on the Freedom of the Press. The Hutchins Commission heard testimony from 58 representatives from the press, interviewed 225 people from government and industry, held 17 two- and three-day meetings, and studied 176 documents prepared by its staff before issuing its report, *A Free and Responsible Press*, in 1947. But rather than defend media practices, the report sounded an alarm. If the media failed to act responsibly, the commission prophesied, the government would have no choice but to regulate them. “Those who direct the machinery of the press have engaged from time to time in practices which the society condemns and which, if continued, it will inevitably undertake to regulate or control,” the Commission said, adding that “freedom of the press can remain a right of those who publish only if it incorporates into itself the right of the citizen and the public interest” (Leigh, 1947, pp. 1, 18). The Hutchins Commission said that the press was responsible for providing (1) daily news that is trustworthy; (2) a forum for public expression; (3) inclusive reporting, free of stereotypes; (4) stories that pursue and probe democratic life; and (5) universal access to daily news. Anything less was unworthy of a press that had Constitutional protections so that it could help democracy work, not in order to make money.

These were words that Luce and other lords of the press did not want to hear. They denounced the Hutchins Commission report and tried to ignore its fundamental claim that freedom from government interference did not negate the media’s public service obligations, that indeed freedom for public service was the very premise for freedom from government interference. The media clung to their laissez-faire outlook as if newspaper chains and one-city dailies were not sweeping away traditional free market conditions. Dismissing the Commission’s concerns, the media provided less and less news and opinion for an informed citizenry. They were increasingly in the business of selling audiences to advertisers.

But while the press was ignoring the Hutchins Commission report, journalism schools started to take it seriously. In 1956, social responsibility was being explained along with authoritarianism, libertarianism, and communism as one of the *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956). The following year Wilbur Schramm published *Responsibility in Mass Communication*. And in 1962, J. Edward Gerald’s *Social Responsibility of the Press*, which
complained that the media’s Jeffersonian idealism had been corrupted by their rapacious quest for profit, called the Hutchins Commission’s report “timeless” (Gerald, 1962, p. 103). Generations of journalists would begin their professional lives having considered that their skills were best used for public rather than corporate good.

Social responsibility may not have been a developed theory, but it was a persuasive, other-oriented perspective that valued both freedom from government interference and commitment to the public good. Rejecting government regulation, social responsibility advocated cooperation between the media and citizenry in concrete efforts that would limit market excesses and pressure the media to serve society rather than narrow self-interest. These efforts resulted in the creation of news councils, ombudsmen, and journalism reviews.

The most active news council in the United States was organized in 1970 by the Minnesota Newspaper Association to emulate the British Press Council, which helped maintain public confidence in the press by hearing complaints about news media. The Minnesota News Council, composed of journalists and public volunteers, heard its first case in 1971, when it upheld the complaint about a St. Paul Union Advocate story asserting that a legislator was being paid off by the liquor lobby. (The editor confessed that the story was so good that he failed to find out whether it was true.) Since then the Council has conducted about four public hearings a year, upholding half of the complaints it has received. Other state and city councils still operating are the Washington News Council, which held its first hearing in 1999, and the Honolulu Community-Media Council, which began in 1970. In 2006, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation provided two $75,000 grants to establish The Southern California News Council and The New England News Council.

The only nationwide news council was founded in 1973 with a grant from the Twentieth Century Fund. The National News Council investigated more than 1,000 complaints about media misconduct and published its conclusions in the Columbia Journalism Review and later in Quill. But major news organizations, including the New York Times, Associated Press, and CBS, opposed news councils, claiming that they opened the door to government regulation of the media. The National News Council could not continue without their support, so it ceased operating in 1983.

A more immediate approach to media accountability has been the appointment of ombudsmen, in-house critics who respond to public criticisms of media content. Harkening back to the Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play that Joseph Pulitzer started in 1913 to handle complaints about his New York World, media ombudsmen were first proposed formally in 1967 by media critic Ben Bagdikian as a sort of institutional conscience to help maintain public accountability as family newspapers were absorbed into newspaper chains. Three months later, John Herchenroeder of The Courier-Journal and Times of Louisville, Kentucky became the first newspaper ombudsman in the United States. Sometimes called readers’ representatives, readers’ advocates, or public editors, they are usually seasoned and highly respected reporters who criticize newspapers from within. Alfred JaCoby, who served for seven years as readers’ representative for The San Diego Union, recalls the paper’s owner confessing that his criticism sometimes angered her. “But you must go on because it’s good for the newspaper” (2003, p. 188), she told him. However valuable to those media who have them, ombudsmen have been appointed by only a few dozen newspapers and broadcast newsrooms.

A third outcome of social responsibility are journalism reviews, periodicals that criticize the news media. Early journalism reviews include the Nieman Reports, begun in 1947 as part of Harvard University’s Nieman Fellowships for mid-career journalists, which the widow of the founder and publisher of the Milwaukee Journal endowed “to promote and elevate the standards of journalism in the United States” (“About the Nieman Foundation,” 2006). Veteran reporter George Seldes published a more acerbic review, In fact, from 1940 to 1950. The years 1968 to
1975 were a period of ferment for journalism reviews. More than two dozen reviews appeared during this period, ranging from the commercial (MORE, 1971–1978) to the militant (The Unsatisfied Man, 1970–1975). They represented various groups including African-Americans (Ball and Chain Review, 1969–1970), feminists (Media Report to Women, 1972 to date), journalists (St. Louis Journalism Review, 1970 to date), and students (feed/back, 1974–1986). Although most journalism reviews from this period lasted no more than 18 months, their legacy was permanent. Today media criticism is part and parcel of the mainstream media as well as professional organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists. The university-based Columbia Journalism Review (1961 to date) and American Journalism Review (originally Washington Journalism Review, 1977 to date) are still going strong, as are partisan reviews such as the AIM Report (1972 to date) on the right and Extra! (1987 to date) on the left of the American political spectrum.

GLOBAL HUMANITARIANISM

The 1980s brought a new sense of urgency to media ethics. For one thing, the stakes were higher. There were more media than ever before and media audiences seemed insatiable. And the promise of Marshall McLuhan’s global village seemed to be momentarily fulfilled in the summer of 1985 with the charity rock concert Live Aid, which simultaneously reached an estimated 1.5 billion viewers in 100 countries and raised more than $250 million for famine relief in Ethiopia. Media continued to multiply in the 1990s, with direct broadcast satellites and cell phones, not to mention the Internet, which by 2007 had an estimated 1.1 billion users across the world.

However impressive the diversity and the reach of the media had become, the 85 percent of the world’s 6.5 billion citizens without Internet access demonstrated the underside of the exponential growth in communications. Penetration was lopsided. Most North Americans (69 percent) were connected to the Internet, as were most residents of Oceania/Australia (54 percent) and the European Union (52 percent), but few Africans (4 percent), Middle Easterners (10 percent), or Asians (11 percent) were online. The stark contrast between communication haves and have nots illustrated one cause for the replication of patterns of wealth and poverty in the world.

This incongruity of media access and media power was the focus of Many Voices, One World, the influential report that UNESCO’s International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems issued in 1980. The so-called MacBride report, named after the commission’s Nobel Peace Prize-winning chair Sean MacBride, proposed a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that advocated “a free and balanced flow” of information internationally. Among its recommendations were measures to help protect journalists, who were increasingly the targets of violence. (According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, an average of 40 journalists were killed every year from 1992 to 2006 for attempting to report their observations truthfully, and few of the perpetrators were brought to justice.) And bemoaning the predominance of Northern Hemisphere news agencies such as the Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse, NWICO called for a UNESCO-funded Southern Hemisphere news agency to help right the imbalance. “Unless some basic structural changes are introduced,” the MacBride report said, “the potential benefits of technological and communication development will hardly be put at the disposal of the majority of mankind” (International Commission, 1980, p. 3).

NWICO’s insistence on the right to communicate transformed into a broader notion of communication rights that empower people in their own particular circumstances. The handbook Assessing Communication Rights (Siochrú, 2005) conceives communication rights as four pillars: (a) communicating in the public sphere, (b) communicating knowledge, (c) civil rights in communication, and (d) cultural rights in communication. According to this framework, communication
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rights flourish to the extent that media stimulate truly open debate and interaction; that knowledge is generated for the good of all; that citizens are ensured privacy of communication, control over their own personal information, and freedom from surveillance; and that individuals are free to communicate in their indigenous languages and to express their indigenous cultures.

As NWICO promoted just information flows internationally, academic media ethics came into its own organizationally. The first academic center for the study of media ethics, University of Minnesota’s Silha Center for the Study of Media Ethics and Law, was established in 1984. That same year, the non-profit Poynter Institute for Media Studies instituted a seminar in applied ethics for reporters and editors. In 1985, the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* began publication as a semiannual refereed journal; it became a quarterly journal in its fifth year. The semiannual *Media Ethics Update*, now *Media Ethics*, followed in 1988. Courses in media ethics proliferated. A 1980 survey identified 68 colleges and universities with freestanding courses in media ethics; by 1995, more than 158 colleges and universities were teaching courses in media ethics. The Media Ethics Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication was established in 1999 with a membership of nearly 200 scholars, and media ethics has had a presence in the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics from its inception in 1991. Chairs of media ethics were endowed at McGill University, the University of South Florida, and the University of Oregon (which began a graduate certificate program in media ethics in 2006). Since 1990, the Library of Congress has added one book every month under the subject heading of “journalistic ethics—United States,” “communication—moral and ethical aspects,” or “mass media—moral and ethical aspects.”

As media ethics became incorporated into North American academics, international concerns were squarely on the agenda. In 1980, under the auspices of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Anne van der Meiden of the State University of Utrecht (the Netherlands) published *Ethics and Mass Communication*, a collection of papers from Europe, North America, and Asia that addressed ethical issues cross-culturally. At the end of the decade, Thomas Cooper of Emerson College edited another cross-cultural anthology, *Communication Ethics and Global Change* (1989), which showed that concepts of truth, responsibility, and free expression permeate codes of media ethics across the world. Another set of cross-cultural studies followed in 1997 with *Communication Ethics and Universal Values* edited by Clifford Christians and Michael Traber (Christians and Traber, 1997). This book advanced the thesis that the sacredness of life is a universal belief that yields the moral universals of human dignity, honesty, and non-violence. Articles in the 2002 special issue of the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* on the “search for a global media ethic” explored the possibility of universal ethical standards and an international code of journalism ethics, and showed that universal standards and principles have continued to preoccupy media ethics scholars.

Attempts to articulate ethical theories with cross-cultural appeal multiplied. Some turned to the discourse ethics of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1990), who attempted to describe rational and universal “ideal speech situations.” Habermas described democratic life as a state in which the media fostered public conversation and debate based on equality, respect, and empathy. Clifford Christians and two colleagues proposed a theory of communitarianism as an alternative to the dominant individualism and its counterpart collectivism. As articulated in *Good News: Social Ethics and the Press*, communitarianism understood human beings as relational and on this basis proposed democratic transformations of media practices and organizations (Christians, Ferré, and Fackler, 1993). Another theoretical avenue was virtue ethics, which emphasizes what Klaidman and Beauchamp in *The Virtuous Journalist* called “a fixed disposition to do what is morally commendable” (1987, p. 18). Often applied to individuals, virtue ethics also informed discussions of corporations, as Nick Couldry did in *Listening Beyond the Echoes* (2006), which
argues that as moral agents that bear essential information, the media need to be accurate, sincere, reflective, open, and accountable. Others drew on Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) and Nell Noddings’ *Caring* (1984) for feminist media ethics, which stressed equality, respect, and attachment as experienced in actual relationships, values that contrasted with the distance of journalistic objectivity and abstracted rules of professional codes.

For leading scholars, international communication had become more than an area of academic interest. Global, multimedia journalism had become the starting point for media ethics. Stephen J. A. Ward, author of *The Invention of Journalism Ethics* (2004), argued that the development of global news media and online journalism necessitated new approaches to journalism ethics. He contrasted parochial perspectives with more ethical, cosmopolitan perspectives. Parochial perspectives settled for a national context, neglecting cross-cultural comparisons of media traditions and practices. They acknowledged international reporting, but as a foreign activity disconnected from local practices. Cosmopolitan perspectives, on the other hand, situated practices and principles in a global context. Thinking of media serving a global human good, they define ethical journalism as helping address the staggering problems of humanity (Ward, 2006).

**CONCLUSION**

The four periods of ferment in American media ethics history—the Progressive Era, professionalism in the 1920s, social responsibility after 1947, and global humanitarianism after 1980—signify a century of concern about media ethics on the parts of citizens, practitioners, and academics. The fact that the public has been involved in media ethics from the beginning and that professionals and academics have taken public concerns seriously shows that media ethics is a democratic enterprise. Issues such as fairness, privacy, and truth-telling have been debated in public forums, seminars, and newsrooms to various effects. Assumptions underlying these debates have changed from the caveat emptor of libertarianism to the obligations of social responsibility and global humanitarianism. Sometimes media ethics changes media behavior, sometimes not. Whatever the outcome, citizens in a democracy usually get the media they deserve.

Historical investigations of media ethics tend to be topical. They have traced the histories of ideas such as objectivity or privacy. The most useful of these histories have asked questions that have a bearing on current practice: How have issues in media ethics been framed? What assumptions did various sides of arguments make? What kinds of evidence were employed in the arguments? Were answers to questions translated into policies and practices? How has the enculturation of media ethics changed over time? Who has been revered in media history, and what does such reverence say about the generation that held these individuals in high esteem? What people, institutions, policies, and practices have exemplified key changes in media ethics? What lessons can be learned from the past, and does our present vantage point allow us to render judgments on previous practices? *Is* may not imply *ought*, but the more we know about how media ethics has been conducted in the past, the more perceptively we can address the important issues in media ethics today.

**REFERENCES**


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2. A SHORT HISTORY OF MEDIA ETHICS