There has been ongoing debate about the commonalities between journalism and other professions. This chapter contributes to that debate by situating the study of comparative ethical concerns within previous research on professionalism in journalism and by drawing parallels with other professions to illustrate key ethical tensions that cut across domains. This analysis centralizes ethical concerns regarding epistemology and identity to derive the following ethical tensions: the tension between attachment and disinterest; the tension between authority and fallibility; the tension between autonomy and accountability; the tension between individual and community; and the tension between procedure and substance. In discussing these tensions, this essay suggests parallels with medicine, the academy, engineering, public administration, and law. Underlying all these tensions is the peculiar nature of professional power, its uses and abuses.

WHO IS A PROFESSIONAL?

Noting the lack of a common literature and common associations among mainstream journalists, Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, and Wilhoit (2007) concluded: “There is a professional mindset among U.S. journalists, but its influence is found mainly in individual news organizations rather than in the larger institutions of journalism” (p. 243). This assessment illustrates the attribute approach to studying professions. Basically, an occupation qualifies as a profession if it possesses certain idealized attributes. These attributes include: mastery of a complex body of knowledge; considerable discretion in how members define and perform their work; organization along collegial lines of authority; and a commitment to public service and common standards of excellence. Journalists usually get left off the list of professions based on the attribute approach. Although journalists are committed to public service, their ethical views are quite diverse, their expertise is disputed, and their prerogatives are severely limited by the hierarchical organizations that employ them.

Some professionalism scholars dismiss idealized attributes as irrelevant and focus on professional identity from the perspective of the workers themselves. This phenomenological approach focuses on what professionalism means when workers use the term. Studies that focus on journalists’ perception of objectivity as an ethical norm are an example of this approach (Beam, 1990).
Other examples include studies that focus on professional identity as a widely shared occupational ideology (Deuze, 2005) or a discursive frame of reference (Carpentier, 2005). Of course, many workers aspire to the prestige and purposefulness that professionalism implies and invoke the term as nothing more than a way of expressing their own personal commitment to competence and the highest ethical standards (Meyers, Wyatt, Borden, & Wasserman, 2012). However, the professional label is problematic for journalists because of its implications for controlling member entry. Many U.S. journalists think that any barriers to entry—especially legal ones, such as licensing—pose intolerable dangers to press freedoms under the First Amendment. Therefore, the term “professional” is contested among journalists themselves. Some embrace and promote it; others reject it on principle. The fact that many journalists see themselves as professionals, however, has moral significance insofar as they make promises and other commitments related to this identity. Journalists’ fidelity to these commitments can be evaluated in moral terms.

**POWER AND PROFESSIONALISM**

Although the status and legitimacy of journalism are in decline (Lewis, 2012), journalism still wields considerable influence, whether or not it possesses enough traditional attributes to qualify as a full-fledged profession. To the degree that their influence translates into dependency and vulnerability on the part of others, we can scrutinize journalists’ responsible exercise of power (Elliott, 1986). Professional ethics, with its assumption of power asymmetries in professional relationships, provides a useful starting point for such an examination. May (2001) suggested that professional authority is essentially adversarial because it is based on the ability of professionals to protect clients from negatives such as diseases, lawsuits, and despots. Clients are forced to accept diminished autonomy in their relationships with professionals in exchange for their protection. “Structurally, the professional’s relationship to the client resembles the relationship of the Lockean state to the citizen. Both the state and the professional owe their original authority to a threat” (pp. 61–62).

In journalism, this feature of professionalism is captured in the image of the press as watchdog: You need us to be on the lookout for corrupt officials, business scams, tornadoes, and crime waves while you go on with your busy lives. If something important comes up, we’ll let you know. Journalism’s clients become monitorial citizens (Schudson, 1998) whose only role is to scan the news for immediate threats to their well-being and who, by definition, must rely on journalists to tell them what they ought to care about. Sometimes, clients resent their diminished autonomy enough to walk away from the professional relationship altogether. In fact, the migration of news audiences to alternative content providers may be partly motivated by a wider cultural movement toward de-professionalization and more egalitarian transactions (Lewis, 2012).

Journalism’s agenda-setting function has been highlighted by critics of the media’s power at least since Vice President Spiro Agnew’s public critiques in 1969 (Altschull, 1990). In fact, Bowers, Meyers, and Babbili (2004) defined power as “the ability to achieve one’s agenda, usually by manipulating others” (p. 227). Using this definition, they concluded that the institutional procedures used to define news control more than just what gets on the radar of public opinion; they also control the agenda in journalists’ interactions with subjects and sources, with their publics, and with other nations. Digitally networked media have changed this dynamic considerably by making information easy to produce and to share. Nevertheless, journalists continue to value their traditional professional role of deciding what is news and often resist outsider participation in this process (Lewis, 2012).

Power in journalism has also been problematic because traditional journalism lacks a proximate relationship with its clients, the “public.” Journalism’s clientele historically has existed as
a diffuse entity often conceptualized in self-serving terms. The current emphasis on inclusion has sensitized journalists to the notion that they may have more defined publics (Deuze, 2005), and journalists increasingly interact (at least virtually) with individuals through social media and blogs. Nevertheless, there is more of a reality check built into the interactions of other professions that deal directly with the individuals seeking their services. Journalists, by contrast, have their most personal interactions with sources and subjects; that is, third parties in the professional–client relationship. As third parties, sources and subjects cannot count on being the intended beneficiaries in their interactions with journalists. There is, in other words, no concrete basis for trusting that journalists will refrain from exploiting the vulnerability of either the public(s) or the individuals who provide the raw material for news stories.

PROFESSIONALISM AND JOURNALISM ETHICS

Professionalism as a Source of Individual Autonomy

Individual autonomy is an important presumption of those who train for and enter the professions, and it is no different in journalism. Journalism ethics scholars, too, have privileged autonomy. In one of his earlier and best-known works (1974), Merrill famously championed radical freedom for journalists. He wrote, “The authentic journalist—the truly moral one—would not act to please somebody or to gain some advantage or to secure some reward …. The act should be done because the journalist is convinced that it is right” (p. 186). Merrill’s unflinching call for radical autonomy propelled him to oppose most reform movements of the twentieth century, including public journalism, and to worry about the waning of press autonomy in the face of increasing public participation in journalism. His position on autonomy did not mean he embraced professionalism as others have. In fact, he called professions a “narrow, monolithic, self-centered fellowship of true believers” (1986, p. 56) who posed a threat to press freedom. His students and colleagues have not shared this view of professions, but have supported his emphasis on autonomy as central to the journalistic mission (e.g. Barger & Barney, 2004) and under siege in the contemporary media environment (Lewis, 2012; Singer, 2007; Singer Domingo, Heinonen, Hermida, Paulussen, Quandt, & Vujnovic, 2011).

Indeed, U.S. journalists have a “visceral attachment to autonomy” (Glasser & Gunther, 2005, p. 389). They want to choose which stories to cover, how to cover them, and how to report or illustrate them. They also expect, more generally, to be independent from other individuals within and without the profession, an expectation reinforced by the competitive ethos of American newsrooms and the liberal tradition of interpreting freedom of expression as a negative right. Willnat, Weaver, and Wilhoit (2017) linked decreased job satisfaction among U.S. journalists to substantial erosion in perceived professional autonomy since 1982. Ironically, rather than being a paragon of journalistic practice, autonomy itself may make it difficult to ask normative questions and to promote a democratically useful press (Kunelius, 2006). Finally, as Glasser and Gunther (2005) noted, journalists’ reluctance to participate directly in allocative decisions at their organizations has had the unintended consequence of limiting their actual influence on the conditions and quality of their work.

Professionalism as an Instrument of Organizational Control

It is true that professionalism does afford practitioners some measure of discretion (Soloski, 1989), but the high level of autonomy implied by many professional ethics codes does not exist—if it ever did. Far from enjoying total control over their work, most professionals labor within
bureaucratic structures that organize work along hierarchical lines of authority. These professionals have used various strategies to insulate themselves from organizational influences—for example, newspapers have enforced an imaginary “wall” between their editorial and advertising departments. However, the reality of organizational life is that professionals are as susceptible as other employees to organizational socialization processes and reward systems. Indeed, research on the sociology of news work suggests that news organizations have successfully co-opted professional values by equating them with efficient routines that unobtrusively control news workers even while affording them some freedom from direct supervision (e.g., Gans, 1980; Soloski; Tuchman, 1977). Journalists’ level of autonomy is, in fact, so inadequate relative to professional expectations that some authors have suggested that journalists are effectively excused from meeting the stringent moral obligations of truthfulness and independence espoused by their profession (Birkhead, 1986; McManus, 1997). In other words, they cannot be held fully accountable after all.

Professionalism as a Source of Accountability and Ethical Norms

Professionals are to avoid abusing the inherent power inequality in the professional–client relationship by acting as trustees of their clients’ best interests. To earn the trust of their clients and of society, professionals voluntarily adopt codes of ethics that spell out their aspirations and minimal moral expectations. That is, they make themselves answerable, or accountable, to others. In journalism, there are a number of professional societies that have made public statements about ethical standards that apply to journalists generally (e.g., the code of the Society for Professional Journalists) and to particular subsets of the profession (e.g., the code of the National Press Photographers Association). These statements tend to focus on the principles of truthfulness, independence, and non-maleficence.

Nevertheless, journalists do not appeal regularly to their own ethics codes when making ethical decisions (Boeyink, 1994). And, although the ethics code for the Society of Professional Journalists embraces accountability as one of its four guiding principles, journalists (like other professionals) are better at preventing interference from outsiders than they are at inviting scrutiny from outsiders. This stance has become more and more of a losing proposition as transparency has become the new motto of public communicators who are no longer willing to simply trust journalists’ motives and expertise (Craft & Heim, 2009; Phillips, 2010).

Professionalism as a Source of Individual Identity

When professionals become socialized into a profession, they acquire a new identity. That identity includes expectations of collegiality and autonomy, as well as commitments to a common purpose and common standards of excellence. Social scientists studying professionalism have tried to measure such dimensions of professional identity via individual indicators, such as membership in professional organizations. Embedded in these inquiries are questions about the central role of professionalism and professionalization in how journalists construct their identities and embody journalistic values (McLeod & Hawley, 1964).

Longitudinal studies exploring the demographics of newsrooms in the United States and globally have illuminated the changing face of journalism and suggested roles that journalists feel most comfortable playing—for example, as information disseminators, interpreters, adversaries or mobilizers (Willnat et al., 2017). They also reflect roles that are more surprising or less comfortable for journalists—for example, cultural elite and corporate creatures (Overholser, 1998).
The latter term is itself a subject of special scrutiny in the literature on professionalism and identity. Such studies are a kind of contemporary and journalistic development of Whyte’s (1956) classic treatise, *Organization Man*, in which he argued that a social ethic is at work in society, morally legitimating “pressures of society against the individual” and exploiting our belief that belongingness is the “ultimate need of the individual” (p. 7). What that means is that organizational identity impinges on journalists’ constructions of their own professional identities. Nevertheless, professionalism also provides a strong alternative target of identification within news organizations. Professional journalists, in effect, have access to independent external standards for evaluating journalistic work and news management (Soloski, 1989). With the right amount of solidarity, the profession can function as a moral community that can provide a frame of reference for feeling both professional shame and professional pride (Borden, 2007).

Unfortunately, an emphasis on professionalism as an individual characteristic, rather than one that is held in common with other colleagues, has impeded the development of professional organizations and unions that could address journalists’ work conditions (Fedler, 2006; Glasser & Gunther, 2005) and could offer concrete support for individuals who take courageous action in behalf of the profession’s shared values (Borden, 2000). In fact, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) wrote, “contrary to many of the critics, journalism’s major problems may stem from too little professionalization, not too much” (p. 127).

Professionalism as a Source of Cultural Authority

Professionalism gives journalism, like other occupations that claim to produce specialized knowledge, a measure of cultural authority; that is, authority to interpret reality (Winch, 1997). Other professions have the authority to announce medical breakthroughs or offer legal interpretations; journalism’s niche is sifting through events and issues and declaring some of these to be “news.” This determination is made by applying specialized gatekeeping, reporting, and writing techniques.

According to Winch (1997), cultural authority has three dimensions: collegial (based on the regard of peers), cognitive (based on recognized intellectual standards), and moral (based on an altruistic orientation). All three dimensions are significantly enhanced by professional status: Self-regulation serves as quality control. Expertise guarantees need for services. A vocational orientation limits the pursuit of self-interest. The more professionalized an occupation is, the more convincing are its claims of legitimacy and the more power it enjoys in society. Journalism’s rather weak claims to professional status partly explain its relative lack of occupational power within organizations and within the market. Journalism’s cultural authority has also suffered because laypersons now have easy access to information on the Internet and can fact-check stories and personally examine the raw materials on which news accounts are based. In addition, the recent surge in populism has weakened trust in the press based on its association with corrupt elites.

That being said, journalists will take what they can get. When journalism’s cultural authority is threatened, its practitioners move to rhetorically draw boundaries that will solidify their standing with the public, whether the threat comes from purveyors of entertainment (Bishop, 2004; Mathisen, 2019; Winch, 1997) or the information slingers on the Internet (Lewis, 2012; Singer, 2003). For example, journalists in the 1980s denounced the tabloids as unreliable purveyors of gossip. In the 1990s, they criticized cable TV pundits who mixed fact with opinion. Today, they point out that most bloggers and aggregators do not do their own reporting and discredit purveyors of fake news.
Professionalism and the Production of Knowledge

Knowledge is a “core generating trait” of professionalism (as cited in MacDonald, 1995, p. 185). Journalists do not necessarily lay claim to the auspicious task of creating knowledge, though they would readily accede their part in reporting the knowledge that others create or discover. Still, journalists’ participation in producing that unique animal known as news reflects a larger epistemological battle between an impartial account of an objective reality on the one hand and a socially and culturally constructed narrative of society’s goals and values on the other.

Sociologists in the 1970s called into question objectivity’s ability to effect what its practitioners intended:

> Bringing to the forefront issues like values, roles, and ethics, what emerged from (the sociological) literature was a growing recognition that journalists crafted standards of action collectively with others and that those standards in turn structured journalists’ approaches to news. (Zelizer, 2004, p. 58)

Tuchman (1972) portrayed objectivity as a strategic ritual whose uses were both pragmatic and procedural. Schudson’s (1978) historical study of the rise of objectivity further exposed its less-than-sanctimonious origins. Thus began the questioning of whether and to what extent newspeople would be able to execute their mission of reporting the truth with dispassionate exactitude. Tumber and Prentoulis (2005) remarked that, “the problems of basing a professional practice on such an illusive concept have never ceased to challenge” (p. 65). Indeed, most U.S. journalists surveyed in 2013 did not see objectivity as extremely important to their roles (Willnat et al., 2017). Critiques of objectivity flung open the door of postmodern questioning (Hallin, 1992), as did scandals in newsgathering (Eason, 1986). At the center of the debate was the very nature of language itself. According to Taylor (1985), language can never be neutral and by its very nature constitutes rather than merely describes. This process of articulation means that journalists will not be able to portray some sort of truth with a capital T regardless of their use (or omission) of adjectives and adverbs. Some scholars suggest that objectivity can be refurbished by incorporating contemporary insights into the nature of knowledge and inquiry (Ryan, 2001; Ward, 2005). However, if knowledge is contingent rather than pre-existent, epistemologically constructed rather than objective, constituted rather than depicted by language, professionalism arguably functions as an impediment to media morality by occluding the journalist’s role in creating news. Scraps of information replace the holistic cloth of knowledge. In T.S. Eliot’s (1962) astute formulation, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” (pp. 96–97).

FUNDAMENTAL ETHICAL TENSIONS IN JOURNALISM AND OTHER PROFESSIONS

One of the most difficult ethical tensions in the work of professionals, and especially those who come face-to-face with human affliction and suffering, is to establish the appropriate relationship between attachment and disinterest.

The Tension Between Attachment and Disinterest: Parallels with Medicine

To what degree should a professional be interested only in the problem posed (diagnosis or treatment, gathering of information), removed from the actual person whom it affects? In 2006, Quill magazine highlighted the “unique dilemma” of whether Western journalists should help
the subjects of their stories in developing countries (Reporters in Africa, 2006). Dilemma, with its Greek etymology, is a well-suited word, because it implies that both choices seem good, but exact a high price.

Although medicine is more self-consciously, directly, and unabashedly a helping profession than journalism, it too faces this enigma of negotiating the relationship between professional disinterest and attachment. Although a physician must display enough disinterest to approach diagnostic problems impartially and to maintain adequate interpersonal distance with patients, it does not seem ethically optimal to regard the persons under one’s care exclusively in terms of clinical interest. Journalists likewise must see the persons about whom they report, take some responsibility for the consequences of their words and images, and yet avoid an emotional investment so deep that it precludes the ability to complexly describe multiple perspectives. It is the age-old tension implicit in journalism and in professionalism generally—the often forced dichotomy between being professional and being human (Bowers, 1998).

One of the most poignant examples is that of South African photojournalist Kevin Carter, who committed suicide three months after accepting the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for his dramatic image of a vulture awaiting the demise of a starving Sudanese child. Carter said after taking photographs for a half-hour, he left the toddler alone, sat under a tree to smoke a cigarette and cried.

Another important issue is the power difference between professionals and the persons with whom they deal. Both journalists and doctors are in the dominant position. Many people involved in newsworthy events have had no experience with journalism, cannot imagine how they could appear in a story, and are notably unskilled at protecting their own interests. On the other hand, third parties often share an adversarial role, or at least one of disinterest, as shown by the common use of the term “source” to describe such persons. If the source is media savvy, the adversarial relationship is less morally problematic. In contrast, the equivalent in medicine is rarely the case. Many patients today come in much better informed than in the past, but they admittedly have no expertise in medicine and have much more willingness to trust the medical profession as a whole to protect their health interests. Both doctors and journalists must walk with ethical care in the life-and-death dramas of those whom they encounter. S. Elizabeth Bird (2005) has contended that journalists could profit by incorporating ethnography into their writing, a sentiment other scholars have echoed. Although she admitted this would lead to greater ethical dilemmas, she maintained it would also lead to journalists becoming “aware of their sources as people” and “critical of the kind of easy answers that claim the story comes first” (p. 307). In other words, they might exercise authentic empathy, rather than the strategic empathy they routinely enact in their interactions with sources and subjects (Borden, 1993).

The Tension Between Authority and Fallibility: Parallels with the Academy

All professions can be morally evaluated in part on their exercise of what Code (1987) called epistemic responsibility—that is, whether they use “good enough” standards to know what they claim to know. To demonstrate their reliability, professionals often vouch for the claims they make on the basis of expertise, which can be grounded in scientific study, objective reporting procedures, and so on. However, they risk looking naïve or self-serving if they do not acknowledge that they make mistakes or even that non-professionals may sometimes have the answers. This situation creates a tension between invoking authority and acknowledging fallibility. In this regard, journalists have much in common with academics. Scholars are more comfortable than journalists about stating the limitations of their research methods and even acknowledging
the underlying assumptions of their work. That being said, they still have a stake in conferring authoritative status on their findings to distinguish scholarship from common-sense intuitions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the classroom, where the unequal status between teacher and student is predicated primarily on the professor’s superior (and credentialed) knowledge of the field.

Certainly, raising questions is as useful as answering them when it comes to learning. Professors as well as journalists would be professing their expertise more responsibly and more credibly if they acknowledged the constructed and tentative nature of knowledge. For journalists, this would mean being more transparent about how they determine what is news and framing news in more tentative terms (Borden, 2007). They might network with citizen journalists and bloggers to provide citizens with a more complex view of the world while not relinquishing their special status as knowers who rely on independent reporting and other epistemological disciplines drawn from journalism’s unique professional tradition.

The Tension Between Autonomy and Accountability: Parallels with Engineering

By making themselves answerable to those who depend on them, professionals voluntarily place limits on their discretion and get into the messy business of weighing the moral claims of diverse stakeholders. Professionals traditionally have addressed this tension between autonomy and accountability by ordering their obligations to moral claimants. Clients come first, then colleagues, then society, then third parties. In practice, however, the organizational context of professional work often defeats this strategy. Organizations typically mediate the relationships between professionals and their clients. Clients do not pay professionals directly, nor do they seek their services as individuals. Rather, they go through the organizations that employ professionals (Newton, Hodges, & Keith, 2004). This structure makes professionals directly accountable to their employers and only indirectly accountable to their clients. In this regard, journalists and engineers find themselves facing similar challenges.

Both journalistic and engineering clients are thus vulnerable to organizational professionals who may elect to pursue the interests of their employer over their interests. The best-known engineering example is the 1986 Challenger disaster. Robert Lund—an engineer who also was a vice president in the company that manufactured the space shuttle’s defective rocket booster—was pressured to downplay the safety concerns he had as an engineer and to prioritize instead the efficiency and publicity concerns he had as a manager. The results, as we know, were tragic. Journalists likewise face situations in which the public’s interest and the corporation’s interest may be at odds. A well-known example is the decision by corporate officers at CBS News to initially prevent 60 Minutes from airing a segment in 1995 that exposed wrongdoing by a major tobacco company. The story showed that Brown & Williamson deliberately manipulated the chemical content of its cigarettes to make them more addictive. CBS said it nixed the story for fear of being sued. Eventually, 60 Minutes aired a shorter version of the story without identifying the whistleblower.

The organizational context of professional work is not the only complication. What about the moral claims of entities such as democracy or the environment? How is an engineer supposed to weigh the interests of an endangered owl against the interests of a client whose project will damage the owls’ habitat? How is a journalist supposed to figure out the right approach to covering a referendum that effectively diminishes the rights of some citizens while enjoying strong support from the majority of voters in her state? Engineers are broadly accountable for being good stewards of the environment, just as journalists are broadly accountable for being good stewards of democracy. But the best way of resolving the kinds of conflicts illustrated by these examples is far from clear.
The Tension Between Individual and Community: Parallels with Public Administration

Community is another abstraction that tests the moral imagination of professionals. Professions may be collectives, but they are collectives that vouch for certain capacities of mind and heart belonging to individual practitioners (Larson, 1977). The tension between individual and communal identities is especially problematic for professions such as journalism, which have a prominent civic dimension. Excessive individualism threatens to impoverish conceptions of professionals as well as conceptions of citizens. In this regard, journalists have much in common with public administrators.

Christians, Schultze, and Sims (1978) noted that early American newspaper editors used to train young apprentices with the idea that “reporting for a newspaper prepared one adequately to understand life” (p. 38). The way that a journalist inhabited the various roles involved in newspapering was inseparable from his understanding of his place in the local community. In contrast, the university-based system emphasized training to prepare one for specialized roles that were transferable from one community to another. This interchangeability made journalists at once more marketable and more scientific. It also made them resident aliens in the communities they covered. The resulting mindset of technical rationality, as Adams and Balfour (2014) called it in the public administration context, narrowed the moral concerns of professionals by removing any necessary reference to social goods. Indeed, any attempt to assert community claims as such is construed as interference or bullying.

This limitation makes interpreting the “public interest” difficult for both journalists and public administrators. What can the “public interest” mean in the modern sense if not an aggregation of individual interests? And so journalists report on opinion polls, and public administrators trust that the votes tallied on Election Day authoritatively express the will of the people. As Jos and Tompkins (1995) noted, expanding public participation and dialogue means that public administrators may sometimes have to confront citizens with hard truths about the effects of public policy and the limits of government action. Likewise, journalists may need to do more than explain how much the latest government program is going to cost; they may need to help citizens make sense of the bill’s underlying philosophy and whether it is likely to promote goals that sustain communities. They also need to resist equating “public” with the “majority”; in fact, there are a number of “publics” that may need help in articulating their separate interests and being heard—and heeded—in the larger public sphere (Haas & Steiner, 2001).

The Tension Between Procedure and Substance: Parallels with Law

In the tension between the Right and the Good, law as a profession is predisposed to favor the Right, which can lead to a valueless orientation. There is no substantive notion of the Good because of the assumption that values are not based in reason. While some scholars argue that values can be based in reason (Taylor, 1997), the concern here is what we will call proceduralism. Proceduralism is most closely identified with the political philosophy of liberalism, which is rights-based, rule-driven, and atomistic, and favors justice over compassion and other social values. The justice system embodies such a philosophy by emphasizing trust in the procedure to produce an ethical outcome (e.g., the jury system in which the mechanism for evidence examination and debate supposedly produces justice). In the case of journalism, this can be illustrated by the willingness of reporters to answer for the procedure used in newsgathering and writing, but not for the outcome of a story. It is a case of what Pech and Leibel (2006) call a “purely epistemic” (p. 146) practice disconnected from any ontological goal. In other words, journalists often make decisions based on what a procedure says they can do rather than determining what
is good to do. The 2005 controversy over the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed is one example. Journalists justified publishing the cartoons despite their offensiveness to many Muslims by saying it was their right, rather than by articulating why it was a good thing to do.

When journalists and other professionals make moral decisions based exclusively on rights, procedures, or autonomy, they forfeit opportunities to foster political discourse and to situate themselves in community; they ultimately risk making themselves meaningless in a global environment (Bowers, 2007; Glendon, 1991; Sandel, 1982). Freidson (2001) explained, “Transcendent values add moral substance to the technical content of disciplines” (p. 222). Yet this implies resisting “economic and political restrictions that arbitrarily limit (the profession’s) benefits to others.” May (2001) recommended that professionals engage in teaching and persuasion aimed at cultivating good habits, not just skillful technique aimed at neutralizing looming threats. In this way, clients would be actively involved in promoting shared goods, such as justice and knowledge.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Ethical concerns regarding epistemology and identity manifest themselves in a series of tensions especially pronounced in professionals, including journalists. These tensions, of attachment and disinterest, authority and fallibility, autonomy and accountability, individual and community, procedure and substance, serve as one rubric for understanding the normative claims on professional life. They are only a beginning, but they also offer fruitful guidance for future research that can more broadly expand and complicate our thinking on professional ethics and its relationship to the practice of journalism.

Most fundamentally, journalism ethics scholarship and pedagogy must closely address the lived experiences of practicing journalists—past, present, and future—in a meaningful way (Pottker, 2005). This may mean searching for new problems, framing traditional problems in a new way, or being mindful of the changing cast of actors on the media landscape (Whitehouse & McPherson, 2002). The urgent need for more professional/academic dialogue clearly shone in the Media Ethics Summit II of 2007. For the first time in 20 years, media practitioners from a diverse set of professional organizations and senior ethics scholars met to discuss the state of media ethics. Many important concerns emerged from the discussions as practitioners shared the contemporary conditions under which they work as well as problems they foresaw. Such conversations need to be more frequent and the formal thoughts of the respective groups, more accessible to one another.

Comparisons to the staid and often slowly adaptive professions, such as medicine and law, should function as tacit reminders that, for journalism ethics to be fecund, it must seek fresh soil and new horizons. On the other hand, well-established professions provide a roadmap for guild power (Larson, 1977) and collective consciousness. These could help improve journalists’ working conditions, provide direction to technological and cultural innovation in journalistic practice, and defend journalists against populist attacks (Gillmor, 2018). Without vision journalism ethics will perish—that is true, but so is the fact that ethics must be practical enough to realize the ideal. Toward that end, Harcup’s (2002) call for academics to address the role of journalists as workers is timely at a time when journalists are increasingly turning to unions to address their job security and independence from business interests (Greenhouse, 2018). Harcup wrote, “Seemingly oblivious to such mundane matters as the working conditions of practitioners, many academics continue to debate the ethics of journalism while ignoring the conditions under which such journalism is produced” (p. 112). Future research must continue to consider how technology is changing the
role and the identity of professionals (Deuze, 2005; Lewis, 2012; Starck, 2001). Here the work of Carey (1969, 1989) is worth re-examination, as he so astutely worried about the implications of the professional communicator privileging the descriptive while subsuming the interpretive. Cultural and ideological approaches (e.g., Carpentier, 2005; Deuze, 2005; Zelizer, 1993), meanwhile, have the potential to move the field beyond a conception of professional identity as a static personal trait to a richer conception of professional identity as a dynamic construction that is negotiated in the context of professional interactions with colleagues, bosses, publics, and third parties. It may be time to acknowledge the limited professional autonomy that journalists enjoy in practice and start devoting sustained effort to articulating the ethical responsibilities of news executives, media owners, and citizens (e.g., Adam, Craft, & Cohen, 2004; Barger & Barney, 2004). Journalism ethics scholars, meanwhile, can draw on the resources of journalism’s own tradition to articulate and promote a more sophisticated professional epistemology that retains the best of objectivity while shedding its worst liabilities, along the lines suggested by Ward (2005). Finally, researchers must engage in thoughtful analysis of key political concepts as they relate to journalism’s purpose and practices, including democracy, citizenship, and community. The professional journalist, after all, works in the public interest. Any useful system of ethical thought must accommodate that goal.

NOTES

1. The incident re-emerged in professional memory with the 2007 release of the documentary, The Life and Death of Kevin Carter.

2. For discussion of the tension between professionalism and collective bargaining, see Meyers, Wyatt, Borden, & Wasserman (2012).

REFERENCES


33. **ETHICAL TENSIONS IN NEWS MAKING**


