UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC THESIS

JOURNALISM ETHICS

ASSIGNMENT: ESSAY

TOPIC: MEDIA SYSTEMS

Compare two media systems, one with self regulation, the other with a degree of direct government control over media content. Analyse the pros and cons of each system. In your answer, refer to the regulatory bodies and the codes of ethics applying to journalism in your chosen country.

Name: Edmond Ng

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Ethics is seldom practiced in the same way in different societies and cultures. What is considered morally acceptable in one society may be considered deviancy in another. In order to compare the difference between a self-regulated media system and a system with some degree of direct government control over media content, it is essential to first understand what is entailed within the definition of ethics and its practices within the code.

This paper will first define the term 'ethics', before comparing the two different media systems of *libertarian* or *self-regulatory* system in the United States and the *authoritarian* or *social responsibility* system in Singapore (Merrill 2004:4-5; Hachten 2002:148-155). An analysis of the Codes of Ethics between the two systems will be discussed and examples will be used to illustrate how the codes are put in practice. Advantages and disadvantages of the two systems will also be briefly discussed.

According to Louis A. Day (2000), ethics involves the accepted values or moral norms of a society's notions about what is right and wrong and "the distinctions between virtue and vice" (Day 2000:3). It defines what is morally acceptable using "values as the basis of human behaviour", where the criteria of "decisions about right and wrong are made" (Seib & Fitzpatrick 1997:3). In the context of journalism, the code of ethics is seen as "a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues", founded and presented in truth for "public enlightenment" and serve as a "forerunner of justice" (SPJ 2005). This means, in essence, that in order for the news media

to serve the public well, it must be "free from distorting pressure exerted by political or economic forces", and must continue to obtain, keep, and increase freedom in order "to be trusted and protected by the general public" and gain the support of the readers, listeners, viewers, to which accountability is to be rendered (IPC 2005).

From the description by the *Society of Professional Journalists* (SPJ) and *Independent Press Councils* (IPC) above, it is clear that the code of ethics is frequently associated with playing the role of maintaining democracy and accountability in advocating anti-government control of media content to propose self-regulation by journalists in making responsible decisions (Sanders 2003:141-143; Morgan & Herman 2001:6-11). This proposition is practiced in the United States, where freedom of information has been legislated under the First Amendment to the Constitution (Gunewardena 1997:3; Merrill 2004:10). Freedom from government intervention, however, does not guarantee freedom from governance, as media content is primarily still aimed at gaining the 'public trust' and support from the stakeholders, the readers, listeners, viewers, media owners, advertisers, and others (Berry 2000:140-146; IPC 2005).

In comparing the self-regulated media system of the United States and the semi-government controlled media system of Singapore, it is important to note that there will always be advantages and disadvantages within any media system. This paper will now look into marking a comparison of the two different media systems using the Code of Ethics by the *Society of*

Professional Journalists from the United States (IJN 2005b) and the
Journalists' Code of Professional Conduct from Singapore (IJN 2005a).

In the Code of Ethics by the *Society of Professional Journalists* of the
United States (US), the primary focus duels with the professionalism in
news gathering, contrasted with practices and tactics that should not be
used. It defines what is permissible and what is unethical, emphasising on
adherence to content accuracy, distinguishing commercialisation, provision
of plurality in views, acknowledgement of news source, and considerations
of privacy, taste, rights, accountability, and obligation to publics (IJN
2005b).

In the *Journalists' Code of Professional Conduct* from Singapore, emphasis
is focused on the need for a high standard of conduct by journalists,
requirements of honesty, not for journalists not to discredit "himself/herself,
his/her union, his/her newspaper or other news media or his/her profession".
Foremost of all is to "keep in mind the dangers in the laws of libel,
contempt of court and copyright" (IJN 2005a).

From the comparison between the two different codes of ethics, it is
apparent that self-regulated system such as practiced in the United States,
does not set a control of media content within the Code, apart from its
method, practice, and expectation of professionalism as journalists. The
absence of this control sets the stage for the *libertarian* system where press
freedom is emphasised to advocate against government intervention. The

First Amendment to the Constitution, in addition, enforces the law in ensuring "the freedom of expression to participate actively in political and social affairs" (Gunewardena 1997:3; Merrill 2004:10). This may be seen in how journalists exercise their rights under the Fourth Estate in performing the role of watchdog over the government to ensure democracy (Campbell 2004:55). In a case during the aftermath of the Gulf War, for example, journalists in the United States were able to exercise their rights under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to find out what actually happened during the war (Campbell 2004:35-36).

The journalistic Code of Ethics in Singapore, on the other hand, is different from the libertarian model. A look at the Code shows a degree of government control over media content in placed within the Code (IJN 2005a). The statement, "every member shall keep in mind the dangers in the laws of libel, contempt of court and copyright", for example, defines the dangers of overstepping outside the realm of controlled jurisdiction. This statement in the Code has been frequently exercised by the Singapore government in the past and present, and has taught journalists to practice a form of 'self-regulation' or 'self-protection', a type which is different from free press, spelling indirectly the gradual death of journalistic professionalism (Berry 2000:147). In a case between the Singapore government and the publisher of *International Herald Tribune* in July 1995, the Singapore courts ordered the publication "to pay libel damages of $670,000 to the country's top three leaders for a story that would have amounted to mild political comment in the West" (Hachten 2002:150).

According to the 2004 Report on Human Rights by the United State's *Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor,* "the (Singapore) Government continued to restrict significantly freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as well as to limit other civil and political rights. Government pressure to conform resulted in the practice of self censorship among journalists. Government leaders continued to use court proceedings and defamation suits against political opponents and critics" (BDHRL 2005). This statement essentially shows the level of press freedom in Singapore.

While a media system with government intervention may be seen as ethical in Asian cultures because of its role in providing the needed growth for post-war economy in Asia, it is recognised that the main disadvantage of government intervention is the lack of free press, free speech and free expression (Merrill 2004:11). Self-regulatory media system, on the other hand, provides freedom of speech and expression, but is not without its own problems. The notion of morally offensive content, such as "pornography in cyberspace, gruesome photographs in local newspaper, lesbian relationships in prime time, blasphemy at the box office", and commercial exploitation, for example, may pose different level of acceptance and offence in different cultures (Day 2000:293, 305). The questions that need to be answered frequently in a self-regulated system are who should determine what is right and wrong, and to what degree? Is it in the government's jurisdiction or the industry's to define the degree of ethical practices (Day 2000:305)?

In considering ethics and codes, there is a need to realise that freedom and responsibility is relative to what is deemed as virtue or vice in the respective country and culture (Day 2000:293). Since ethics is measured differently in different cultures, there is a need to consider the extent of censorship permissible while retaining ethicality (Day 2000:305). Considerations should include addressing the demands of target readers and audiences so as not to be dictated by them in pursuing an adequate level of ethical practice in their preference for specific media content.

As can be seen from the arguments in this paper, there is no single media system that is better than the other. Whether a media system is self-regulated or government-controlled, there will be different aspects of ethics that need to be addressed. The code of ethics practiced by journalists is dependent on the defined and accepted values or moral norms in the particular society where the journalists are, and these defined codes of ethics will determine the right and wrong.

(1,413 words)

APPENDICES

IJNET (2005a) 'Singapore Code of Ethics: Journalists' Code of Professional Conduct', *International Journalists' Network*, http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/codeethics.asp?UILang=1&CId=158610&CIdLang=1 (Accessed 20 July 2005).

International Journalists' Network

English	Español	Português	عربي

Published by the International Center for Journalists

Singapore

Choose a Country ▼

Code Of Ethics: Journalists' Code of Professional Conduct

1. Every member shall maintain good quality of workmanship and high standard of conduct.

2. No member shall do anything that will bring discredit on himself/herself, his/her union, his/her newspaper or other news media or his/her profession.

3. Every member shall defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and dissemination of news and the right of fair comment and criticism.

4. Every member shall realise his/her personal responsibility for everything he/she prepares for his/her newspaper or other news media.

5. Every member shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty.

6. Every member shall use only honest methods to obtain news, pictures and documents.

7. No member shall accept any form of bribe whether for publication or suppression nor permit personal interest to influence his/her sense of justice.

8. Every member shall respect all necessary confidence regarding sources of information and private documents.

9. Every member shall keep in mind the dangers in the laws of libel, contempt of court and copyright.

10. Every member shall observe at all times the fraternity of their profession and shall never take unfair advantage of a fellow member.

Source: Independent Press Councils

Normal View

IJNET (2005b) 'United States Code of Ethics: Society of Professional Journalists', *International Journalists' Network*, http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/codeethics.asp?UILang=1&CId=8369&CIdLang=1 (Accessed 15 August 2005).

International Journalists' Network

English	Español	Português	عربي

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ICFJ

United States

Choose a Country ▼

Code Of Ethics: Society of Professional Journalists

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity.
- Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information.
- Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible.
- Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story.
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage.
- Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

- Show good taste.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media. Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984 and 1987. The present version of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics was adopted in September 1996.

Link to the home page of the Society of Professional Journalists

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