

**GUEST EDITOR’S RESEARCH ARTICLE ON
“ETHICS, MEDIA AND PUBLIC LIFE”**

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The main aim behind this Special Issue of the *French Journal of Media Research* is to examine the role ethics and media¹ in public life. In its simplest formulation, public life deals with an individual’s interactions with her fellow-citizens in the public sphere and has an important bearing on her actions and decisions in such sphere. Given that there are various constitutive elements to an individual’s identity and politics, our investigations regarding ethical interconnections of media and public life turn out to be even more challenging and complex (Gripsrud, Moe, Molander & Murdock, 2010, xxiii). Although it may not be easy to address all aspects of the above difficulty, scholars have tried to understand them. One way to respond to the above challenge is probably to ponder over the conceptions of the common good that run through our social and political theory, without finding enough practical support in the lives of democratic citizens (Lipmann 2010, 33; Gripsrud, Moe, Molander & Murdock, 2010, 151-152). Ordinarily, ethical notions assume the presence of an agreed upon common good but does not always explain how it can be cultivated in the lives of citizens (Abbey & Spinner-Halve 2013, 133). Alternatively, it can also be argued that the idea of a common good is not essential to political life in that citizens mostly prioritize their own good (Lipmann 2010, 33). In the functioning of democratic states, we find different understanding and manifestations of the common good. It is our purpose in this Special Issue of the *Journal of French Media Research* to reflect over the conceptions of common good via the concept of public life in democratic societies, arguing that ethics and media can play a central role in the constitution of public life and democratic institutions. A vibrant public life, contributors to this Special Issue believe, requires the presence of a responsible and ethical media. Needless to say, that in a democratic society media performs many useful functions, including informing and educating citizens, publishing relevant policies and programs, and deliberating over issues of the day. Taken together, all these functions mature in the role of a watchdog media in a liberal democratic society and are essential to its public life.

1 I use the term media in an extensive sense, including print media, social media, television, online sources and all other forms of journalistic communication and reporting.

MEDIA IN THE AGE OF ALTERNATIVE FACTS

Even though media theorists differ on the precise role of media in the democratic countries, they seem to still acknowledge that the presence of a free press and vibrant media is essential to the functioning of democratic government and institutions. Adopting an aspirational view of media functions, some have argued that a free and fair media not only contributes to the day-to-day workings of a democratic society but also has an overall educative social and political value (Gripsrud, Moe, Molander & Murdock, 2010, xxii). Democratic governments derive their power and authority from citizens, and are ultimately accountable to them. In other words, how a government is going to function on a particular issue will depend, on a large measure, on how the citizens of that country feel about that issue. If citizens feel strongly about certain policies and programs, those policies stand a great chance of being implemented. Media can play a powerful role in the articulation of the views of citizens, expressing their feelings and emotions on the raised issues (Allen 2005, 63).

It is also suggested, however, that the aspirational conceptions of media functioning either overlook its practical and realistic aspects or conflate them in a positive direction. Many media outlets are controlled by business houses and corporations and have their own agenda (Allen 2005, 28-29). They promote the stories that fit their stated social and political beliefs, maximize their profits, and give pass to the information which may not be attractive to readers/viewers, never mind its relevance to them or to the overall functioning of a democratic polity – and its citizenship. In other words, it is a bit optimistic to think that media can serve as a watchdog under current conditions. In essence, it is bound to look for the gratification of its own interests. Bear in mind though that the above characterization of aspirational view and its realist critique is meant to serve as archetypes but does not negate the possibility crossovers. It is quite possible that the same individual who believes that media platforms these days are dominated by corporate interests may rely upon media sources on many occasions, without giving up her contentions.

Despite their disagreements over the role of media in a democratic society, both the aspirational theorists and their critics have traditionally negotiated a shared conception of facts. Common to such a conception of facts is the belief that the world as we know it has a certain texture and consists of certain events, and that it is the task of a responsible news media to report on such events and to keep the public informed. In other words, the debate between the aspirational theorists and the critiques has focused, by and large, on the details of media function, including whether the media is doing its job right or not, and not on the conditions of possibility of available common facts. But this understanding of common facts has become contentious in recent times, raising questions regarding media functions on a core philosophical level. Responding to a question regarding the conflated crowd size at the inauguration of the 45th President of the United States, Kellyanne Conway told the CBS journalist Chuck Todd that the White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was providing us with “alternative facts”, and that he was not exaggerating the crowd size.²

² Rebecca Sinderbrand’s column “How Kellyanne Conway ushered in the era of alternative Facts” in the *Washington Post*, January 22, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/22/how-kellyanne-conway-ushered-in-the-era-of-alternative-facts/?utm_term=.735d861a7532

There was a swift critical reaction to Conway's remark in the global media. She was accused of prevaricating the truth and conjuring up the numbers to support her colleagues and boss as well. In the same exchange with Conway, Chuck Todd interjected: "Wait a minute ... alternative facts? Alternative facts?.. Four of the five facts he uttered were just not true. Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods".³ Writing for the *Guardian*, Jill Abramson gave more context to Chuck Todd's intervention: "Most people believe that there is truth and there are lies. 'Alternative facts' are lies".⁴ These criticisms seemed fair in the sense that Conway was trying to mischaracterize the crowd size at an event that was screened on a live television, in the presence of a huge press pool and visitors, and that did not match her description. However, not all reactions were along the same lines. Many in the conservative media felt that Conway's story was overblown and that the liberal media does not tell the truth as conservatives understand it. This shift in the conversation from questions regarding factual grounding of Conway's remarks to the liberal media bias is particularly interesting because it does not deny her prevarications but contends that the overall media environment in the US is unfair to begin with. More strongly, facts seem to have become a matter of perception and representations of our consciousness and beliefs in the public sphere. I will say more on this in the next section.

ETHICS AND THE UNDERPINNINGS OF RESPONSIBLE MEDIA

The strong reaction against Kellyanne Conway's presentation of 'alternative facts' signifies a broader social phenomenon pertaining to the US politics and media.⁵ In the course of media polarization in the past some decades, Americans have become increasingly divided over their political commitments and views and are less willing to modify them even when confronted with stark reality. For the supporters of President Trump, the liberal media is not a reliable source of news. On the contrary, they believe that media is continuously trying to concoct stories that will tarnish the image of the president, minimizing his accomplishments.⁶ In other words, the questions regarding the inauguration crowd size are not about an ethical reporting of facts, but more about casting aspersions on a president who is fond of grandeur.

A stiff opposition to facts, simply because they do not fit in one's political profile or frame, raises further questions regarding the goals of political action in the US and has implications for the voters all over the world. It would follow from this account that, as a

³ Jill Abramson's column "Alternative facts are just lies, whatever Kellyanne Conway claims", the *Guardian*, January 23, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/23/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts-lies>

⁴ Jill Abramson's column "Alternative facts are just lies, whatever Kellyanne Conway claims", the *Guardian*, January 23, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/23/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts-lies>

⁵ Chris Cilliza's column "Kellyanne Conway offers alternative fact to explain why Trump isn't lying", CNN online, July 24, 2017: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/24/politics/kellyanne-conway-trump/index.html>

⁶ Catherine Clifford's column "Billionaire restaurateur: Trump is doing a great job", CNBC.Com, March 7, 2017: <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/03/07/billionaire-restaurateur-why-i-think-trump-has-done-a-great-job.html>

voter, an individual has certain preferences and convictions, and is willing to adopt a political posture to supports them.⁷ In other words, voters are not rational actors in the conventional sense of the term. They can be extremely irrational when their politics requires. This rigidity in political positioning is consistent with a stronger claim forwarded by elitist democratic theorists who believe that the democratic citizens act on the basis of their feelings and emotions, and have little to do with facts and rational argumentation: “I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omnipotent citizen...the citizen gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but *a casual interest in facts* and but a poor appetite for theory” (Lipmann 2010, 27-28; italics mine).

Lipmann criticizes the classical liberal democratic theory and its proponents for assuming a plethora of concepts that do not find any meaningful support in the functioning of democratic societies and governments. Most citizens, he contends, neither understand the delicate and complicated functions of governments nor have any propensity to grasp them. They are busy with their lives, doing their work, raising their family, running a shop, or responding to their other personal obligations. Moreover, they hardly have any time to engage in abstract deliberations regarding ethics and common good, and pay very little attention to the honest functioning of media. Lipmann further insists that the ambivalence towards political processes runs very deep in the minds of democratic citizens and puts a question mark on the democratic theory: “He [voter/citizen] lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct...Men make no attempt to consider society as a whole” (Lipmann 2010, 26 & 30).

Lipmann is saying that the purpose of electoral politics in democracies is not to find the best way to serve the common good or the interest of the whole society but to identify capable leaders who could lead under adverse conditions. Each individual has her own priorities and preferences, feelings and emotions, and wants to express them in her own way. At the same time, she also requires a secure political context to express her freedoms. Only capable leaders can provide with such conditions, ensuring the availability of free social and political space. Accordingly, the goal of a democratic education, he concludes, should be to develop the capacities of citizens to discern such leaders, without worrying about their moral compass.

It is easy, of course, to dismiss Lipmann’s contentions as pessimistic and sad. His conception of human nature is not too far removed from its dismal characterization by Thomas Hobbes and Machiavelli, who argued for parallel ethics for sovereign and citizens. However, it helps us understand why a large number of voters will not withdraw their support to a candidate even when his ethical and moral failings are widely reported. For instance, it was very well known that the candidate for the US Senate seat in Alabama Justice Roy Stewart Moore had allegedly inappropriate relations with teenagers.⁸ Yet, that reporting did not change the minds of Moor’s core supporters, despite persistent plea by many, including

7 A poll showed that after 100 days in office President Trump’s supporters approved his job with an astounding 93 percent to 7: <http://time.com/4758889/trump-voters-approve-president/>

8 https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/woman-says-roy-moore-initiated-sexual-encounter-when-she-was-14-he-was-32/2017/11/09/1f495878-c293-11e7-afe9-4f60b5a6c4a0_story.html?utm_term=.665c0a1619ea

some prominent Republican leaders, to not vote for Moore. Supporters of judge Moore thought that he was falsely accused and that facts were misreported by the media to malign the reputation of a ‘good man’.

The above moral permissiveness of voters reminds us that their ethical standards are not the same when a candidate of their liking is on the ballot. With likeness comes a sort of self-adopted moral agnosticism in politics: No matter how compelling the evidence is it is not compelling enough to abandon a candidate or his/her political platform. It remains to be shown what are the main reasons behind this kind of voter psychology but it cannot be single factor, as Lipmann has shown. It may be a collection of reasons that forces voters to behave the way they do while refusing to learn for credible media sources, chastising them as partisan. The moral permissiveness of voters also reminds us why news media must earn political neutrality and impartiality if it wants to play a meaningful role in the democratic processes. In other words, media must act ethically to ensure its credibility and acceptable presence in the democratic processes.

The fact that voters and citizens are not always be open to reasoning and persuasion, even if Lipmann is correct, does not tell the whole story. It also equally true that the same voters respond to the calls of higher common purpose and interest of the whole society when they trust in their leaders. In other words, whether a source is considered trustworthy or not has implications pertaining to voter responses. Same applies to the media and journalism as well. To be a credible source of news, or a watchdog, the news media must cultivate its integrity and provide vetted information to the public without engaging in political filtering. Media neutrality need not mean moral equivalence in all situations and among all parties. We know it for fact that some policy positions are more problematic than others and that some actions, *prima facie*, are wrong. Ethics teaches us that. A proper inclusion of ethical standards in the media will help it develop a more interactive and symbiotic relationship with voters and strengthen their trust in the received information and news.

ETHICS, MEDIA, AND PUBLIC LIFE

I have suggested in the previous section that the construction of alternative facts poses a serious challenge to the news media, and that ethics can help, in some ways, in addressing that challenge. To the same end, I suggest now that ethics and media should be effectively included in the public life. This requires us to deliberate over 1) the ethical principles that can serve as regulative links in the public life and also 2) if it would be possible for media to adopt them in day-to-day functioning and reporting. Moreover, any answer to our inquiries must be consistent with the known aspects of public life in the democratic societies. In other words, it cannot be completely theoretical and abstract.

Questions regarding regulative ethical principles often slide into substantive conceptions regarding the good life and appropriate moral conduct in one’s life and relations. In the democratic public life, however, there is hardly any room for the discussion of such matters. John Rawls has shown that an individual’s interactions in public life must be confined to the political, excluding the substantive notions regarding the good life and appropriateness of one’s ethical conduct (Rawls 2005, 77-78). Without going into the specifics of Rawls’ arguments, it can be said that his contentions have a far-reaching impact on the workings of many liberal democratic societies and have accentuated, even if

unwillingly, the political and cultural identity of citizens. This happens, particularly, in his treatment of comprehensive doctrines when he argues that an individual's comprehensive beliefs pertaining to his life, plans, religion and culture are to be left alone and excluded from the considerations of public life. He writes: "...a basic feature of democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism – the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions. Citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines" (Rawls 2010, 205).

Working under the rubric of political reasonableness of democratic citizens and institutions, Rawls stipulates that citizens as citizens neither criticize nor attack the comprehensive doctrines of others (Rawls 2010, 206). They believe in what they believe in and as long as their beliefs do not run counter to the provisions of justice and public reason, they should not be interfered with.⁹ Moreover, the public reason and justice, as Rawls understands them, are meant to limit themselves to the constitutional essentials i.e. to the application of the principles of justice, without engaging in wider discussions on public life, including the "public political culture" and "background culture". On a textual level, public reason addresses the issues arising at the public political forum which includes three branches governments. Rawls elucidates the presence of public political forum thus: "This forum may be divided into three parts: the discourse of judges in their decisions, and especially of the judges of a supreme court; the discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and finally, the discourse of candidates for public office and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements" (Rawls 2010, 206).

The difficulty with the above concept of public reason is not only that it is too narrow and that it does not fully account for various aspects of citizenship and public life, but also that it entails problematic crossovers. Rawls approves of all comprehensive doctrines on a philosophical and individual level, believing that they can be used later on, as long as they remain reasonable, to support society's political conceptions of justice and public life (Rawls 2010, 216). The thinking is that citizens will recognize the reasonableness of each other's comprehensive doctrines, appreciating their significance in each other's life, and not treat them as intrusions in their public life. The current political trajectory of various liberal democracies, however, presents us with a different narrative. Many citizens seriously criticize the crossovers of comprehensive doctrines in political life, wondering if the idea of a 'reasonable comprehensive doctrine' makes room selectively for some comprehensive doctrines in the public sphere, while ruling out others on the grounds of reasonableness (Murphy 1998, 261).

Knowing what is reasonable and what is not reasonable in comprehensive religious, moral or cultural doctrines requires a thoughtful engagement of citizens and can occur only with good understanding and judgement. Rawls recognizes that. But he remains reluctant to discussing comprehensive doctrines in the public sphere, fearing that such conversations will trigger feelings and go beyond the scope of public reason (Rawls 2005, 58).¹⁰ However, this

⁹ It can be said that the Rawlsian provisions provide strong safeguards at the level of conscience but dilute citizens' engagement and co-operation in the public life.

¹⁰ In extreme cases, such discussions might be construed as oppressive.

reservation on discussion of a comprehensive doctrine is not very helpful.¹¹ They remain as they are i.e. reasonable or unreasonable, while still trying to find recognition and support in the public life. More strongly, Rawls' weak theoretical constraints on the manifestations of comprehensive doctrines in the public life have become a potential cause of concern for many citizens, leading to religious and cultural showdown in many democratic societies.¹²

One way to tackle the above issue could be probably to acknowledge that comprehensive doctrines can be sacred yet open to conversation and that public reason and discussions in the media can play a meaningful role in their understanding and elucidation. A thoughtful and open discussion on an issue, as J.S. Mill has shown, can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the subject matter (Mill 2002, 14-15). If a comprehensive doctrine is to crossover in the public sphere, it may be helpful for citizens to discuss it within the purview of public reason. It must be equally emphasized that to play the above role, media must uphold the highest standards of professional ethics and public deliberation, without engaging in fake and trivial constructions. In other words, media must respect the traditional principles of good journalism, and avoid sensational reporting.

As to how one can meet the standards of good journalism in media, there is no stated answer. There are numerous elements to good journalism, and all of them must be in place to achieve the required outcome. For instance, a news report, to be a good report, must be factually grounded and intellectually vetted, such that it is what it looks and that nothing is glossed over. It should also be fair and balanced in that it does not give an undue edge to one party over the other. The lack of impartiality has led to the polarization of media on a global scale. Many publishing houses and news channels articulate their ideological positions in their news presentations and discussions without mentioning the hard facts in our public life. This is a problem of our times.

To put it another way, if media has play a meaningful role in our public life, it must uphold its integrity. If a comprehensive doctrine is under consideration, it is bound to generate feelings. No one doubts that. Yet if it under consideration in thoughtful way, without prejudice or bias and with reasonableness, its adherents may be more disposed to listening to the feedback that emerges from public deliberations. To share something that an individual considers as important as a comprehensive doctrine, religious or cultural or otherwise, media outlets and personnel must generate enough confidence in their process and reporting. That is why it is so imperative to remain loyal to truth and follow the facts where ever they might lead, without any inhibition or prejudice. An unadulterated reasoning and total commitment to truth and understanding alone can guide this process, ensuring its required integrity.

However, the above integrity cannot be achieved unless a balance between profitmaking businesses and commitment to the truth is found. Business aspects of media practices require it to produce profit by running as many advertisements as possible, finding reliable financial partners and sponsors, so on and so forth. Furthermore, many media outlets are now controlled by corporations who use them for their own purposes. Sufficient safeguards need to be instituted so that public deliberations over truth are not monopolized or stifled in the interests of financially stronger corporations. It has become all too common to see small newspapers folding because they cannot compete with big corporate ownership of the media outlets. A vibrant public life requires the presence of small scale newspapers.

¹¹ It censors encompassing dialogues, fearing that conversations may go wrong.

¹² For instance, the redefinition of political identity in narrow terms.

CONCLUSION AND THE AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Contemporary public life in many democratic countries is marked with many social, political and cultural differences. Whereas it may not be possible to address the above differences, it may be possible to understand them, or at least some of them, if we approach them with an open and deliberative mind. I have argued that a respect for facts is an essential condition of democratic discourse and that the presence of alternative facts muddles the notions of truth and falsehood and as such it must be avoided. Next, I contend that ethics must inform the functioning of media and that in absence of ethical standards media will lose its credibility. Finally, I have attempted to reconstruct the conception of public life in the third section by emphasizing the interplay of ethics and media.

In the backdrop of my argumentation resides a belief that the democratic public life, if it has to be peaceful and prosperous, must accommodate the possibility of improvements in different domains of human life, without getting bog down with one's excessively narrow loyalties and commitments. I have argued that a free and fair pursuit of truth alone can put democratic government and institutions on a secure and enduring foundation. In the same spirit, I have made room for the inclusion of ethic and media in the conception of public life, not merely on a theoretical level but in practice as well. My own research and findings suggest that the inclusion of ethics and media will add to the conception of democratic public life. However, the nature and depth of such inclusion is far from clear in the contemporary political context and needs further investigation and understanding.

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