

# Ethical Foundation for the Press Effectiveness in Public Opinion Monitoring and Social Criticism

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, in order to promote the press's functions of monitoring public opinion and social criticism, governments at all levels need to be proficient in using public opinion tools and promoting the active role of the press in this task. However, in reality, the line between social criticism and professional ethics is quite fragile and unclear. By overviewing theories on supervision and constructive social criticism of the press, the article will analyze the ethical foundation for the press's effectiveness in public opinion monitoring and social criticism today.

**Keywords:** ethics, monitoring, social criticism.

## Press ethics

The professional ethics of journalists – “the secretary of the times” are the rules and standards that regulate the attitudes and behavior of journalists in professional and social relationships. The professional ethics of journalists are the press's ethics. In English, the word “Ethics” is used by journalists and media agencies around the world to refer to “morality” of journalists. Ethics comes from the Greek word “*éthkos*”, which means “to distinguish between right and wrong”. In the early twentieth century, Joseph Pulitzer – who owned the New York World newspaper (America's most prestigious Pulitzer Prize for journalism was named after him) required three famous standards for the press: “accuracy, accuracy and accuracy”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Peter Arnett, who has won 57 world journalist prizes, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1966 for his work about the Vietnam War, said that journalists need to tell the truth as it is, besides their own “styles and independence”<sup>(2)</sup>. In any historical period, the press is a “mirror” of society. The press is responsible for reflecting society in its complex existence from many different perspectives to all classes, ages and genders. Many commercial news agencies around the world have argued that finding the truth is only one of the goals of journalism. However, if the press only makes profit for its own without bringing benefits to society, it creates a “formula” for disaster. Therefore, professional ethics is one of the fundamental

qualities in journalistic activities. To develop healthily and to build prestige in society and the public, journalism must always respect and promote its professional ethics.

Carrying out the task of monitoring public opinion and social criticism, the press may encounter situations where ethical values cause conflicts such as disoriented information, following trivial trends, focusing too much on negative information that causes false perceptions in the real picture of society, causing ambiguity, confusion and even pessimism in public opinion, negatively affecting the building of new public ethical standards for today's young generation.

*The nature of the press's constructive criticism and public opinion monitoring*

Public opinion monitoring and social criticism is one of the fundamental functions of the press. First of all, the press needs to detect good deeds and violations of organizations and individuals, thereby orienting and leading public opinion to create pressure on authorities to explain to the public and the people, thereby promoting democracy as well as building public trust. From the journalistic viewpoint, press and public opinion always have a close, dialectical relationship and mutual impact. The judgment of public opinion comes after the reflected news. This is one of the important contents. Every day, the press and media deliver public opinion, including consensus, disagreements, etc. It can both reflect and express public opinion, and can also orient and lead public opinion. For that reason, the press's role in managing and supervising society must always ensure a two-way flow of information, including the information about guidelines, policies and decisions in management and leadership, and accurate, objective, and truthful information about what happens before and after policies and decisions are made by leaders. If the press delivers one-sided information, it is difficult to participate in social management activities, because the press is not only a necessary mass media but also the "ears and eyes" of history.

How to maintain proper supervision, criticism and reflection, including the good sides and shortcomings, in a fair, open and widespread manner is an issue for the press to find solutions. Therefore, when participating in monitoring public opinion and social criticism, the press needs to promote humanity and focus on the principle of "constructive journalism", which is different from "glorifying" everything, and "gloating" about the detected mistakes and inadequacies of the business, organizations or individuals.

So, what is the nature of journalism's monitoring of public opinion and social criticism in a constructive manner?

As early as 1948, H. Lasswel, an American media expert, one of the four scholars who laid the foundation for the world's media industry, analyzed meticulously the function of the press and media in "social monitoring and criticism"<sup>(3)</sup>. In society, the press must be responsible for detecting and promptly reporting the problems that society is facing, and at the same time publicly warning authorities at all levels to change and propose measures to deal with immediate challenges and crises, thereby ensuring social stability. In society, each occupation has its own task: The teacher's task is to teach and deliver knowledge to students; The doctor's task is to cure the patient; The press's task is to "monitor public opinion and social criticism". Therefore, social monitoring and maintaining social order are mainly expressed in the press's functions.

It can be seen that the starting point and ultimate goal of public opinion monitoring and constructive social criticism is to find a thorough solution to the problem and the betterment of the current situation. That is also the nature of public opinion monitoring and constructive social criticism.

To be more specific, as every coin has two sides, social monitoring activities are like a "double-edged sword". Exposed negative problems always attract more attention from the public; however, this is also quite sensitive because those who were exposed by the press may react aggressively or even openly confront and sabotage. In reality, constructive social monitoring needs to promote the positive effects of monitoring activities, at the same time, keep an eye on controlling its destructive potential. This demonstrates a dialectical method of thinking: "destroy to establish", the ultimate goal is "to establish" - that is, constructiveness. The criteria for selecting topics of the press in constructive social monitoring and criticism activities are hot issues that can be resolved, at least are concerned by relevant agencies. Monitoring public opinion and constructive social criticism requires the press and media not only to expose and condemn shortcomings in society, but also to be able to point out the right direction and solutions to the problems, to promote development and create positive social effects. For events and social issues that urgently need to be solved, the press needs to actively investigate and monitor, promote its strengths, find opportunity and cooperation, and persistently pursue the matter to the end. For events and issues which still have many different opinions or debates about, or temporarily have no solution, the press needs to be cautious, based on

observation, analysis and judgment, with the positive evaluation, then orient public opinion, and create breakthroughs. Regardless of the circumstances, one should not just raise the issue one-sidedly without considering the feasibility of solving the problem and the public's tolerance.

### **Press ethics in social monitoring and criticism**

Objectively, negative manifestations in journalistic ethics that reduce the effectiveness of public opinion monitoring and social criticism result from the negative influence of the market economy. This is a factor that strongly affects journalistic ethics in the context that journalists' income is not high. Some newspaper and magazine agencies have given reporters a blank check, causing the common phenomenon that some reporters put pressure, intimidate, extort businesses to earn money. Currently, there are still many loopholes in the legal corridor for journalistic activities, thus, violations of journalistic ethics are not strictly controlled. Many journalists take advantage of "monitoring public opinion and social criticism" to investigate and "hit" corporate agencies, causing unnecessary consequences. When journalists do not distinguish the line between journalistic ethics and public opinion monitoring and social criticism, they themselves reduce the effectiveness of social criticism of the press. Effectiveness refers to "solution journalism", "constructive journalism", or journalism that knows how to select the good and suppress the bad. From the current situation of the press's monitoring of public opinion and social criticism recently, it can be seen that its effectiveness depends largely on the participating parties, mainly including the mass media groups who work in many different fields, regardless of age, gender, occupation, interests or habits. Through research, we can withdraw some issues of journalistic ethics that need to be considered when monitoring public opinion and social criticism as follows:

*First*, the media should not merely expose cases. A highlighted principle of constructiveness in the press's monitoring public opinion and social criticism is not to report unilaterally. Paul Lazarsfeld, an American media expert, highlighted the "publicity" of the press. He said that after publicly exposing acts that go against social ethics, the press would make those involved feel pressure from public opinion, thereby urging them to return to the trajectory of complying with norms and rules. In practice, the press's public report activities are very beneficial for promoting the resolution of emerging problems, however, not all public information can solve everything well. Even sometimes publicity may make the problem more complicated

and confusing. For example, in the late 1980s, the General Secretary of Soviet Union's Communist Party advocated to improve the "publicity" of the press by encouraging the press to expose issues and inadequacies in society, to report many secrets in the history of the Soviet Union. However, "publicity" could not solve the shortcomings in Soviet society at that time, instead it caused chaos in values and loss of control over public opinion, finally weakening the leadership ability of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, pushing the country into the abyss of dissolution. Therefore, exposing negative issues publicly for social monitoring and criticism requires paying more concerns to value trends. This means journalists must distinguish the objective of publicity: to promote constructiveness in solving problems positively or to expose destructive negativity to simply get more "views" and "likes" from the public opinion.

*Second*, it is not difficult to realize that even in countries where the flag of democracy is raised in the press, such as the United States, the press's monitoring of public opinion and social criticism sometimes went off track, even "deviated" in direction. In the early 20th century, the American press once raised a nationwide "movement" to condemn and expose a number of capitalist corporations for industrial manipulation and hindering the market competitiveness, exposing the corruption of officials and the vast gap between the rich and the poor in contemporary society. In general, those journalistic works mostly stood on the stance of protecting the common interest, in line with the fundamental interests of the American ruling bourgeoisie, so they were considered to have made contributions to social reform activities and the "progressive movement" of that time in the United States. Even those activities were said to "save the capitalist regime"<sup>(4)</sup>. However, later, the press's public opinion monitoring and social criticism activities appeared to be perverted, that is, increasingly becoming a form of struggle applied by parties. The press focused on uncover scandals of the ruling party and its leaders, with the purpose to discredit, dethrone them by "crime allegations" that were increasingly far from the interests and concerns of the public.

In the 1990s, the American press loudly reported the Lewinsky scandal, an evidence showing that monitoring activities were only purely exposing<sup>(5)</sup>. The American press exposed incumbent President Bill Clinton's affair with Lewinsky. At that time, this case on the surface was the press's public opinion monitoring activity but underneath was the Republican Party's

fight to dethrone President Bill Clinton who belonged to the Democratic Party, thus this did not represent the interests of the public. This was also the reason why President Bill Clinton's support rate did not decrease but increased. This scandal also affected the image of the American press for a long time; criticism of journalists' ethics became a topic of widespread concern<sup>(6)</sup>. In addition, the American press's public opinion monitoring and social criticism activities included the phenomenon of "political bullying" and even "economic bullying". Therefore, in parallel with promoting the function of monitoring public opinion and constructive social criticism, the press and media need to be vigilant and oppose such "bullying monitoring" behavior to ensure the constructive orientation.

*Third*, journalistic ethics promotes the verifying and inspiring role. In the book *"The Elements of Journalism"*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel<sup>(7)</sup> argued that, in the new context, a journalist must play the role of "verifying" and "inspiring". As a verifier, journalists need to select the value of information through different lens and tell the public "what to believe in the events they face and what not to believe in or pay attention to". As inspirers, journalists put "events into the appropriate context to be able to transform information into knowledge". Reality shows that people cannot avoid a situation in which moral values cause conflict. Therefore, when monitoring public opinion and social criticism, journalists need to uphold professional ethics, especially appreciate the core value of journalism, which is truthful and objective reflection of all aspects of social life. However, in any circumstances, management agencies and press agencies must strengthen professional ethics education for journalists, and the prerequisite is to promote self-discipline and self-practice of each journalist. It is also necessary to strengthen the immune system of journalists by educating national ethical traditions and civic awareness, improving professional capacity, and educating political and legal theory for journalists.

*Fourthly*, information needs to be balanced, public and humane. Looking from today's media life, we can see that many painful incidents are caused because some journalists create the work. Some journalists made up stories or oriented them in such a different direction that made the situation chaotic, consequently, affecting the public and people. In the past, incidents such as using brooms to sweep vegetable, mangoes wrapped with strange bags, sulfur-dyed litchi, instant noodles with leeches... were all fake news, negatively affecting the reputation and honor of the press. Therefore, in the process of

monitoring public opinion and social criticism, journalists must keep their honesty and clear-mindedness, which is the core of journalistic professional ethics. When monitoring public opinion and social criticism, it is necessary to fully inform both the successes and limitations of things and events and must be consistent with the interests of the country and the people.

In society, journalism is a unique profession in which journalists have the right to freely reflect objective truths and present their views and opinions according to the nature of the issue, thereby orienting public opinion, creating forum for exercising freedom of speech. However, freedom of the press must not be contrary to the national and ethnic interests, especially must not provide information that misleads the public, creating loopholes for reactionary hostile forces to have the opportunity to sabotage the country building and development work. In addition, when monitoring public opinion and social criticism, the press must also promote humanity, for example, always taking the mainstream of information about good people and good deeds as the foundation to guide public opinion. One of the press's missions is to nurture public confidence, bring good messages and meaningful images to multiply the good things in life. Therefore, when monitoring public opinion and social criticism, journalistic ethics need to consider that they should not only "scrutinize" the negative aspects of society, causing unnecessary anxiety and insecurity to the public when accessing information in the press. If the journalists only focus on scrutiny, they will unintentionally "blacken" the image of society, causing skepticism, distracting people's hearts, leading to the cracks of social mood - one of the risks to social unrest.

*Fifth*, to improve the professional ethics of journalists, especially when participating in social monitoring and criticism, the head of a press agency must always set a typical example in preserving professional ethics. In particular, the editorial board must always be alert in choosing and evaluating topics, ideas and detecting errors in the journalist's working process. During the process of monitoring public opinion and social criticism, press agencies need to pay attention to public feedback, and then listen to public feedback so that they can capture information about journalists during their work, to promptly prevent bad and negative behaviors of reporters and journalists when participating in social monitoring and criticism. Thus, it can be seen that every journalist needs to innovate journalistic thinking, combining political correctness with modern working style, especially in using language to promote professional ethics and respect for readers, honesty, accuracy and



objectivity. Furthermore, press agencies, reporters, and journalists who are determined to participate in the process of monitoring public opinion and social criticism need to clearly demonstrate the Party-ness, the people, the ideology, and the fighting spirit in every journalistic work. More importantly, journalists need to promote social responsibility when creating journalistic works, always keeping in mind the need to put national and ethnic interests to the top priority. That is the core value of Vietnam's Revolutionary Press.

Social monitoring and criticism is one of the important functions of the press. In particular, the press is considered the “eyes and ears” of history, actively participating in the work of preventing corruption and negativity, refuting false and hostile views. Many events and phenomena of corruption and negativity exposed by the press have created public opinion's pressure on the authorities to have prompt and effective intervention. However, in today's media environment, journalists and press agencies must always be careful in language, images, video clips and headlines... that affect individuals or organizations, especially the ethics of journalists when participating in monitoring and social criticism. Therefore, journalists always need to have their own criteria for their career, upholding their conscience and responsibility to society. Journalists must keep in mind that an individual's violation of professional ethics not only affects his honor but also the reputation and brand of the press agency. As a supreme principle in social monitoring and criticism, leaders of press agencies must be exemplary, because if “the top is illegal, the subordinates go chaotic”. Therefore, a clean and healthy media environment is needed to ensure effective social supervision and criticism./.

(1) Christ Frost, 2015. Journalism ethics and regulation (Fourth Edition)

(2) Peter Arnett, *To write the truth as it is*, The Youth's Weekend, 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2007.

(3) Lasswell, Harold (1948). Bryson, L. (ed.), *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. The Communication of Ideas*, New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies.

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(6) Michael Schudson (2011), *The Sociology of News*, W. W. Norton & Company, P.22.

(7) Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2013), *The Elements of Journalism* (News Agency Publishing House).