

# A communitarian ethic of communication in a postmodern age

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## Resumo

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O autor delinea algumas áreas de confronto entre a ordem liberal, moderna e linear de comunicação e um novo *ethos* de comunicação percebido como comunitário, pós-moderno e participativo, explorando ainda em profundidade as teorias normativas da comunicação.

**Palavras-chave:** comunicação de massa, ética da comunicação, teorias normativas da comunicação

## Resumen

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## Abstract

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The author outlines some confrontation areas between the liberal, modern, and linear communications orders, and a new communication *ethos* which has been noticed to be post-modern, interactive and commonly present in the community, and he goes on further exploring the normative theory of communication.

**Keywords:** mass communication, communication ethic, normative theories of communication

Over the last thirty years we have witnessed profound changes in the way people communicate and changes in what people consider "good", "pleasurable" communication. Until the 1960s, few questioned that the ideal form of mass communication instructional, summed up in the benign formula, "inform, educate and entertain", with the emphasis on "educate". Communication researchers were trying to find better ways to incorporate people into nations and mobilize people into the organizations of factory, government bureaucracies and businesses. The linear model of communication transporting information from source to receiver to obtain transforming effects was more or less taken for granted as "the" model of communication.

Today the ideal of communication would be much more "participatory", "dialogical", "horizontal" and "creative". Students are uncomfortable with a teacher who does not allow questions or discussion. Young people often feel that they learn more in the informal discussions among themselves than in the lecture halls. Students are not just listening to the ideas of masters, but are attentive to the ideas and interpretations they create on their own.

This shift in communication styles and norms is evident not just in the school context but in virtually all institutions: the church, the family, the informal organizations we belong to, the way we organize our leisure time, even in the more disciplined communication of the work place. This new style of communication is also transforming the public communication of the mass media. Newspapers are no longer limited to informing about political debate but must have a spread of specialized sections with emphasis on leisure activities, travel, media and entertainment, cultural debate (somewhere between philosophy, religion and styles of life), sport, food and the furnishing of our homes. A newspaper is not simply information for silent individual reading in order to form one's own personal opinion, but a continuation of leisure time discussions among friends.

Although the public media - newspapers, magazines, radio and television - are shifting in an attempt to "find" their publics and maintain their following, in fact, the readership of newspapers and magazines is dropping, especially among young people (CHRISTIANS, FERRÉ, FACKLER, 1994). Even television viewing seems to have peaked and is declining in countries such as the United States. This parallels a decline in voting in political elections and less participation in political parties, in churches, in labor unions and virtually all other "public" institutions.

If there is a crisis in public institutions and public communication, I would argue that this is due, in part, to the fact that public communication is still organized in terms of a linear "nation-building" ethic of communications while the new communication is a more communitarian ethic, organized around subcultures of leisure and of identity search. Leisure is the time away from work organizations, a time I can call my own. During leisure time the primary imperative is not to "obey orders" in order to produce some output but to enjoy my own identity and engage in activities that

reveal and develop my identity. In somewhat oversimplified terms, most public communication assumes a communication ethic of the modern while audiences are increasingly living a communication ethic of the postmodern.

In the following paper I would like, firstly, to outline some areas of confrontation between the older liberal, modern, linear ethos of communication and what I perceive to be a new communitarian, postmodern, participatory ethos of communication taking shape. Secondly, from this analysis of how we experience the clash of styles of public communication, I would like to explore a deeper clash of normative theories of communication, the clash between the logic of the libertarian theory of individualistic relations in the public sphere and the logic of the communitarian theory of public communication.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, to make this more concrete, I would like to indicate the typical contexts of public communication in which a communitarian ethic manifests itself and describe how a communitarian ethic is expressed in the professional ideals of journalists, script writers or television producers.

Some may object, at this point, that the discussion of styles of public communication has little to do with the "issues of professional ethics faced by journalists". This does not seem to deal with the problems of truthfulness, objective reporting, avoidance of forms of bribes or influence, respect for privacy or loyalty to journalistic colleagues. Such a conception tends to think of professional ethics in terms of a deontology or as embodied in the codes of ethics of national or international professional associations. Media ethics, however, are concerned with far more than the issues at the level of codes. Journalists must be truthful and objective because the public expects this and because the newspaper organization demands it if a newspaper is to maintain its credibility. Professional norms are grounded, most basically, in the values of the general public regarding public communication and, secondarily, in the norms which grow up in the "productive work place" of the press, radio, television, advertising, public relations or any of the many other professions working in public communication. Professional norms are not, of course, derived logically from any system of ethics, but are the result of negotiation of moral claims among many actors - the moral leaders of a profession, the managers of media enterprises, the educators involved with formation of professionals in universities, the political leaders of a country and most of all by the public served by the media (WHITE, 1995). Professional codes of ethics are only the selective writing down of some of the most important aspects of the culture of the professional work place (ABBOTT, 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> I am much indebted to the communitarian concept of public media outlined by Christians, Ferré and Fackler in their recent book, *Good news: social ethics and the press*.

## The crisis of the liberal, modern, linear ethos of public communication

Discussions of the normative ethos of communications are as old as Plato and Aristotle's critique of the sophists in Greece 500 years before Christ (SCHIAPPA, 1991). The dominant ethos of public communication in the modern era emerged with the introduction of the first mass medium, the printing press, and the defense of printers and dissenting thinkers against the corporatist ethos of church and monarchy that sought protect the public against the "errors" of free debate. The liberal ethos proposed that no institution or person could claim to have a monopoly on truth. The basis of truth lies in the expression of the individual conscience in the "free market place of ideas", where a discerning public could sort out truth and error. In more practical terms, the liberal ethos defended the right of any person to operate a printing press and to publish freely without the censorship of government.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of this century, with a much more complex urban society and the emerge of the mass produced press, the public began to demand objective, unbiased information. This led to the movement to professionalize journalism with a sense of social responsibility. Broadcasting was introduced as a form of "public service" to educate, inform and entertain in a decent manner. The social responsibility ethos and public service ethos were still only *modifications* and attempts to improve the liberal ethos of public media.

To describe the liberal ethos of public communication as "in crisis" means that what was once taken for granted as a natural given is now seen as problematic. People experience the expressions of the liberal, "free market place of ideas" in ambivalent fashion: they see advantages in it, but also many disadvantages. The economic basis of the liberal ideal has gradually evolved into a system of buying and selling information as a commodity rather than promoting authentic communication. As the liberal ideal has become associated with the Enlightenment project of instrumental rationality and the modernizing project of the nation state, this ethos of communication is seen as dehumanizing, corrupting and as a form of "non-communication" (ELLUL, 1969).

HABERMAS (1987) has described well the effects of modernity in terms of the "colonization of our lifeworld". Somehow, with all of the advantages and pleasures of modernity, we feel that we have been "invaded" and that we have lost control of the space of freedom to express our identities. Four metaphors of the "colonization of our life space" by the

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<sup>2</sup> McQUAIL, Denis in his text, *Mass communication theory: an introduction*. 3rd. editon. London: Sage, 1994, provides a good survey of the concept of normative theory and the major normative theories of mass communication.

modern ethos bring out well our ambivalence about contemporary public communication: the economic metaphor of public space as “the free marketplace of ideas”, the political metaphor public communication as “nation-building” through the institution of the nation-state, the cultural metaphor of public communication as the conservation of our “folk cultural identity and cultural heritage”, and the social metaphor of the “organic, corporate unity of a pluralist society” guided by the functionalist logic of organic survival in a hostile environment.

## The economic metaphor of the “marketplace of ideas”

From the outset the liberal ethos of public communication was based on free economic enterprise and the capacity to sell in the marketplace. The older notion of public communication as the expounding of truth and the protection of the public from error was eliminated with the slogan of “let the buyer beware” (*caveat emptor*). Anyone who had the economic resources to buy and maintain a printing press had the right to project into the public sphere whatever he could “sell” the public. If the public does not buy it, then this is the best indication that the information is not considered pragmatically worthwhile. The ethos of common carrier, opening one’s newspaper to every form of ideology without comment, avoiding one political bias, and giving the appearance of impartial objectivity were all norms dictated by the need of printers to capture the largest possible market (BOTEIN, 1981; BUEL, JR., 1981). Eventually many argued that the best guarantee that a newspaper was objective and impartial was the fact that it was largely supported by advertising, not by political or religious subsidies.

Advertising is profitable only if the medium guarantees large audiences, and the success of a medium is not that it is telling the truth but that it has captures the largest part of the available market. Advertising is essentially linking a product with an accepted cultural value. For example, cosmetics are linked to the desire for beauty, automobiles to the desire of prestige, and cigarettes are linked to the image of the liberated woman. The logic of advertising is so central to all media that no media content escapes its intent, and it is very difficult to differentiate the so-called information from the explicit advertising.

What this means is that all media content has a strong rhetorical dimension that attempts to catch the user’s attention, make sure the user understands the message, and in some way transforms the user’s consciousness. The media can exist only if the product of the sponsor is “bought”, even when the sponsor is the public service, the church or an educational institution. It is difficult to imagine public service broadcasting continuing unless the audience research division can show that the public are informed, educated and entertained and the national culture is more appreciated.

The increasing resentment of the public toward the “selling mode” of media is not simply that consumer products are being thrust upon us continually or that every relationship of the media is to get something from us, but that the very concept of public communication is to transform our thinking and behavior according to the designs of the author of the message. Our relationship to the media cannot be dialogue or exchange, but only defensive resistance.

Our frustration with the “selling mode” of the liberal tradition of communication is not a repugnance but rather our *ambivalence* regarding this. On the one hand we feel that our personal space is being invaded but, on the other hand, our livelihood depends on this economic system and we want to be informed about products and life styles.

## The political metaphor of public communication as nation building

The dominant sociocultural experience of the past 300 years is the gradual absorption of the villages and regions, with their dialects, local cultures and local economies, into the construction we call the nation. What J. Martín-Barbero has called “the long enculturation” has been accomplished by defining the public sphere and public communication largely in terms of government service responsibilities. As Durkheim pointed out in the first great mapping of the modernization process, we are moving from a social organization of little relatively autonomous villages and regions to a great organic whole in which every part has a function for the survival of the nation in a hostile environment. The challenge for the survival of the nation is to maintain all citizens closely integrated into defined roles and loyal to the national goals. A single public accounting system, a unified educational system and a national transportation system have been central to the nation-building process, but it is no accident that the apogee of nationalism from 1920 to 1950 (HOBBSAWN, 1990) coincided with the introduction of a centralized radio broadcasting system.

The implicit premise of the nation state and the national broadcasting systems association with the national unity has been that all must sacrifice according to talents and capacity to build a strong nation (contributive justice) in order that all may derive the benefits of increased public welfare. In several ways, however, the rhetorical messages of nation building have invaded our life space. Firstly, many have quietly resented the sacrifice of local culture identities. Secondly, although all contributed to the mythic goal of a modern industrialized nation and an ever more glorious future history, it is evident that these sacrifices bring more rewards to some - especially the industrial entrepreneurs - than to others. Thirdly, the welfare state has introduced security of life in the areas of health, old age, unforeseen disasters, and unemployment, but this has brought conditions of government regulation, surveillance and dependency. Fourthly, government agencies manufacture most of the news in that journalists take most of their information

from the publicity offices of government agencies. Increasingly, the public media do not have the resources to get raw data to produce news.

In all of these processes, the nation state rarely imposes through brute force a national culture of forms of uniformity. In an earlier period, dictatorial governments indulged in open propaganda and ideological persuasion, but the obviousness of this repulsed people. Today, the public is generally invited to respond freely in the national effort, and the media are the major channel of persuasive invitation. Again, the media set up a ambience of discussion, dissidence, resistance and negotiation of conflicting opinions into a single line of action. Virtually everybody has the opportunity to voice their opinion in the forum of the media, although this may take some effort. The media have the role of explaining and making clear the action of the nation state, but in helping the public understand what the issues are, the media must frame them within the mythic goals of the nation. Also, like parliamentary discussions, the media must present some narrative outcome. Every sector of the public sees something of their own identities and their own interests, and they are happy to settle for this... even though most of their identity is suppressed in the public sphere.

The role of the media in constructing political hegemony is, again, frustrating because of our ambivalence. On the one hand, we see much of our identity expressed in the construction of the national myth, but, on the other hand, this is often clothed in the ideology of the nation state. Public communication seems so open, so free, so full of debate, but at the same time so much of our identities are suppressed.

## The cultural metaphor of public communication as preserving our cultural heritage

From the outset one of the main motivations for public broadcasting and the new journalism inspired by responsibility to the public was to enhance and preserve our cultural heritage of historical memory, religious values, literature, folklore and civic commitment. In an earlier period when national boundaries were more sacred and cultural globalization was more incipient, most nations were identified by their religious tradition, their stable political party affiliations, an unquestioned knowledge of the sacred moments of history.

With the increasing pluralism of virtually all modern societies, the practice of making the public broadcasting system a dominant norm of culture has broken down, and a policy has grown up of allowing multiple channels to satisfy every taste. Again, we are ambivalent about this because the simple affirmation of pluralism leaves the society with no criteria or procedure for negotiating common values within a multiplicity of deviant subcultures and opens societies to the threat of panics toward cultural fundamentalism.

## The social functionalist metaphor of "organic" adaptation in a hostile environment"

The economic conflict model of the public sphere proved too socially irresponsible and too destructive of weaker groups in society, and it has been largely replaced by a the metaphor of organic adaptation. In fact, the invisible hand guiding adaptation is the leadership of the technocratic elite who have developed a fine-tuned control of the adaptation of every aspect of society from the economy to health.

The dissatisfaction generated by this model is due largely to the emphasis on the good of the society over the good of the individual. The 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the apogee of the faith in the functionalist metaphor and the beginning of the "drop out" generation, especially among the young. This has encouraged the growth of a postmodern culture of individual subjectivity, cultural pluralism and abhorrence of all that is "automatically adaptive", natural and deterministic. Nature and culture are almost infinitely adaptable.

## The roots of dissatisfaction with the liberal, modernist tradition of public communication

To summarize what I would perceive as the smoldering resentment of the public with the media fare that is given to us, I would note, firstly, that there is far more concern with drawing the public into a national political, economic and sociocultural "superunity" and not enough concern with people's search for identities at the personal, local and regional levels. The managers of public communication think they are successful if they have imposed their message on the people and brought them into conformity. This is a communication preoccupied with the declarations of supposedly powerful people making decisions at the top, but it tells us little about the foundations of political legitimacy in the identities of the public. This is a public communication that forgets that there are no leaders if there are no followers or people who find their identities in the leaders. There is much concern with national economic development that supposedly improves the welfare of the public, but there is little concern with whether economic prosperity does, in fact, translate into greater freedom, humanity and affirmation of identities. There is much concern about culture with a capital "C", but little about the meaning of a national culture for the various subcultures of a nation. Our newspapers inform the public in a passive and indifferent way, but the media rarely excite real passion or loyalty except when they addresses identities. This lack of real communication is, for many observers, a fundamental ethical issue.

The world has managed to avoid a Third World War, but the last fifty years have witnessed continual outbreak of civil conflicts that have centered



on attempts to affirm identities. There is virtually no nation in the world that has not been embroiled in a civil war stemming from conflict over regional identities (Spain, for example); social class identities (Latin America); or racial-ethnic and religious identities (ex-Yugoslavia). Conflict over age and gender identities are endemic around the world. The public media inform us about the *existence* of these conflicts and gives us a kind of body count to indicate the magnitude of this particular encounter, but the public - perhaps even the people involved - remain mystified about why there is conflict in the first place. At times the nationalist media fan the flames of sectarian hatred, but generally the modernist logic of the media assumes that these conflicts are simply anomalies that will quietly disappear as people become better educated, achieve higher levels of income, have a greater quantity of media information, are more linked with nationalist politics and, in general, become more "modern".

In general, the public media have glossed over the anger and confusion that people have felt about the threat to identity from modernization and their fears of domination by other identities. The media report the demagogues as simply one more powerful voice who grabs the spotlight. Terrorists, supposedly, can be handled by not giving them media coverage, but lurking under the confused discontent of the majority of the public is the distorted fundamentalist search for identity that feeds scapegoating, violence, racism, desire for ethnic cleansing, and many other forms of sectarian hatred. The media, by and large, do not help different publics recognize their anxieties over identity and their need to confidently affirm identities. How many people in Britain or Ireland have some small understanding of the feelings and identities of Catholics or Protestant loyalists in northern Ireland? It is interesting that international political action regarding Bosnia mobilized once journalists began to report the experiences and sufferings of ordinary people, in part because they could not get access to the top leadership whose vague public relations statements usually find the press.

The roots of dissatisfaction of the public and the roots of the violation of the moral claims of the public are found in a model of public media based on a one-way powerful effects model rather than on a true dialogical, communication model of public media. The original liberal model may have assumed dialogue, but a dialogue between elites. Even today, according to Paolo MANCINI (1991), the major newspapers of Italy are really a dialogue between elites. The advent of the mass, popular media coincided with the era of nationalism and nation building so that the media became an instrument of subjection of the masses to modernization not a means of dialogue of the masses about how they want to modernize.

## Toward a communitarian ethic of public communication

Every normative theory of media must be elaborated out of concrete experiences. My own experiences of media in which I perceived, from the depth of personal involvement, loyalty, identification, real communication are community radio and, in the mass media, particular genres and formats such as the *telenovela*, women's soap opera, popular music and sports. Many might object that these are not central fora for serious issues, but quite marginal. I would argue with Martín-Barbero that the mistake of the political analysts in Latin America and of politically inclined people in general is to overlook the cultural and political significance of fiction drama and the media involving marginal, popular movements (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1993). The model of this kind of journalism is not the objective, value free empirical investigation, but a type of ethnography and literary interpretation which assumes that the professional can enter into the subjective perception of the world of different subcultural groups and experience the world as they do.

The goal is not the liberal ideal of providing bits of discrete information that are made available to other individuals to make sense of and use according to their individual interpretations and for their individual goals (CHRISTIANS, FERRÉ, FACKLER, 1994). In the liberal society, identities and values remain always in the private sphere and the public sphere is only the instrumental, utilitarian mutual help to achieve individual goals without any consensus regarding common values in the public sphere. The public sphere in the liberal society is essentially value-free and amoral. The communitarian ethic argues that if we pretend that identities and values can be kept out of the public sphere, these particularities return with emotional vengeance to destroy society. The communitarian ethic prefers to bring values and identities into the public sphere where they can be dealt with and negotiated openly. The public sphere is not a structure of utilitarian relations but a dialogue between identities that can lead to genuine cooperation and eventually sharing of common values and common moral premises.

The core of the public media event is not the transport of information to obtain effects but the articulation of popular culture as a "text" in which the publics can, firstly, *recognize their identities*. In a second moment this text has the capacity to attract, invite and stimulate these publics to rework the text to produce a new phase of their popular cultures (JENSEN, 1994). This attracts a skillful artisan of public communication to articulate the popular culture in another text which seems to be the best formulation of "where the identity of a public was last caught sigh of". The publics become so passionate about a given text in part because they can recognize their identity in that and they feel that they can rework the text to better express their identities. The public media event is, then, a process of continual dialogue between artisans of popular media and their publics and a process

of dialogue between publics about the different possible interpretations and spin offs from the text.

The essential notion of a communitarian ethic of public media is that the right of different cultural identities to exist is recognized, these different identities are described as they see themselves, and different identities are brought into dialogue. The journalist or other public communicator becomes the ethnographer who can enter deeply into the subjective perceptions of an identity.

The skill of the professional public communicator lies in the ability to detect the search for identities of different publics and to formulate a text that enables the publics to recognize, affirm and act upon their identities. The raw material of the public communicator are the styles of oral discourse of a public, their favorite forms of rhetoric, the issues these publics are concerned about, the narrative structure of the stories they like to tell along with the typology of heroes and villains that this public can identify with, how they express political issues, the forms of critique of power they use, and a host of similar characteristics of the discourse of one or another publics.

Sonia LIVINGSTONE (1990) has found that the most salient response of audiences to fiction drama is the moral characterization of the major actors in terms of shades of good or bad, types of heroes or villains. Underlying this evaluation of actors presented in the text is an identification with what the audience would like to be and a recognition that in myself there are both heroes and villains. Every public media text is reflecting the struggle to define a personal moral identity and the moral identity of reference groups. No matter how objective and impartial a news representation of a figure might attempt to be, the public is going to project upon these figures moral and/or immoral characteristics. The most objective presentation is not a value-free description, but a dramatic unfolding story of the cast with all personages somewhat good and somewhat evil. The art of the public communicator is not simply a reproduction of the superficial characteristics of identity such as the language and interests, but the much deeper moral struggle that are part of identity formation.

If the first moment of the public media event is to set in motion a dialogue, especially a moral dialogue, about one's own identity - who am I, who are we - a second moment, in the perspective of a communitarian ethic, is to articulate a text which reveals the cultural identities of other groups. This "revealing" means making clear other cultural identities as other groups perceive themselves and as they affirm and value themselves. Although the interest in the cultural identity of other groups may be primarily defensive and apologetic, the need to persuade other groups to tolerate the existence of one's own identity implies that one must truly understand the motivations of others if one is to touch those motivations persuasively. Again, fiction drama often presents many different subcultures in "dramatic" conflict and negotiation. Sensitive news stories not only present the fact that groups are in conflict, but explains why different positions and world views seem so "right" to the identities involved.

A third moment is the representation of subcultural groups, not simply aware of each other, but in dialogue. This means that the cultural capital and cultural power of other groups is intriguing, attractive and worth listening to.

A fourth moment is the representation of subcultural groups discovering something of the valuable cultural capital of other groups within their own cultural tradition. There begin to emerge common symbols that provide the basis for common identities, at least at a broader level and the basis for genuine cooperation and genuine sharing of values.

This description of the premises and moments of progressive steps toward building a dialogical public sphere remains at a quite general, abstract level. I would like, now, to take up specific instances of the communitarian ethic in operation.

## The contexts and opportunities for building a dialogical public media

### *1. Representing the marginal and the culturally powerless*

If the liberal modernizing communication ethic focuses largely on enculturation into the nation, one of the most typical approaches of the communitarian ethic is to attribute an independent value to the peripheral subcultures. This assumes that there are multiple paths of development of the nation. The city planners of Lima Peru may have one concept for the development of Lima, but the six million people who live on the periphery of the city potentially have another, equally valid vision of the development of the city. It is important that the vision of the periphery be articulated and brought into dialogue with the city planners. Often subcultures must have their own community and regional media to articulate their own discourse from the oral interpersonal to the print and televisual levels of expression of their world views and aspirations.

The goal in a communitarian ethic is not just that the voice of peripheral be heard in any public debate, but that peripheral subcultures gain "cultural capital" within the overarching cultural matrix of a nation. If immigrants flooding into Lima Peru initially are not perceived to contribute anything to Lima but are just an unwanted burden, it is important that the public understand the world as immigrants perceive it and that immigrants are gradually perceived as important for the revitalization and growth of the city. This creates a new myth of the "immigrant society" in which the continual rebirth of the nation comes from below and from the popular classes and from different linguistic-ethnic groups.

## 2. *The development of the "civil society"*

The emphasis on the nation-state as the major instrument of national development has led to the identification of the public sphere as the action of the state and the elimination of the space between the state and the individual. In the modernization project, citizenship and human rights are derived from the state insofar as it is convenient for the state to concede this. The public media are concerned almost entirely with the decision making at the level of the state, the welfare services of the state and the development of culture as promoted by the state. A major role of the public media is to inform the citizenry of actions of the state or of trends in the political economy of the nation.

A communitarian ethic assumes that citizenship is a human right independent of the state and that the foundation of the nation is the dense infrastructure of voluntary organizations built up through direct participation of the people at the local level. An example of this is the movement in Italy to organize and bring into networks the people's local health committees (*Tribunali degli ammalati*) which represent the rights of the sick to the structure of public health services. Italy has a great many grassroots movements to represent parents with regard to the schools and the media. A communitarian ethic opens a space in the public media for these networks of voluntary organizations that are precisely defending the lifeworld of the citizenry.

## 3. *Questioning the injustices of the "public cultural truth"*

One of the most sacred trusts of the public communicator is to render an objective, true and impartial account of events judged important for democratic decision making. Although most journalistic accounts construct a narrative interpretation from the beginning to the resolution of the event, the interpretation is supposedly left to the conscience of the reader. In fact, the values of the media institution often enter in with the decision to selectively report or not report a given event, but these criteria are rarely made explicit.

Usually, however, the criteria for inclusion or exclusion in the public forum of the media are embedded in the culture of a society and the subculture of the media. The major criteria for the liberal communication ethic are defined by the myth of modernization and what will contribute to the strengthening of the political economy of the nation state.

A communitarian communication ethic is much more attentive to the undercurrents of dissatisfaction and the sense of injustice among peripheral groups. This sense of being treated unjustly arises out of a awareness of identity and one's human dignity. The decision that this should be brought to the public media forum depends in part on the ability of the aggrieved groups to dramatize their plight, but it also depends on the empathy of the public communicator who is able not simply to report this as an objective fact but to enter into the experience of injustice empathetically and

communicate this sense of injustice to others. Again, the starting point for a communication ethic is an entering into the identities of different groups in the society. The goal is not simply to report that a movement seeking justice exists, but rather to appeal to the values of the society and call for a reformulation of what this society considers public cultural truth.

At a given historical moment, some statements may be considered true by just about everybody in the society, but at a later period this same society considers these to be false. For example, in the past, virtually everyone in society has considered racial or gender characteristics as indicators of lower social capacity and justifications of lower social status. Today, our cultures are introducing a new set of truth criteria regarding race and gender identities. The criterion of truthfulness is not correspondence to reality in an epistemological sense, but justice, that is, respect for the sense of human dignity and the dignity of all other forms of existence. Again the skill of the communicator is the ability to bring identities and senses of justice into dialogue so that common symbols of justice may be found.

#### *4. Bringing moral claims into dialogue and negotiation*

A communication ethic based on the "free market of ideas" would argue that these ideas have whatever value the buyers are willing to place upon them. There are no values in the politic forum, only in the private forum. In fact, values are present in the public forum and it is assumed that whatever group is able to dominate the market will establish the moral criteria as a common currency that all other moral claims must be translated into.

A communitarian ethic would argue that every group should bring its moral claims into the public forum so that all groups can understand the moral claims sympathetically and seek a common value which respects integrally, albeit at a more general level, the values of other groups. The goal is to make possible a common set of values operative in the public media forum, but at the same time respect for a diversity of interpretation within subcultures. For example, to take an extremely difficult case, let us suppose that both pro-abortion and pro-life groups were to come together to examine common values. This might well reveal that both groups have a profound respect for life, although medically and socially it is not always apparent how this can be achieved. Nevertheless, the focus could shift from a representation of a struggle for power to a representation of how the common respect for life could be better achieved medically, socially, and politically.

#### *5. Settings the stage for political action*

The communitarian ethic of communication seeks to empower groups through affirmation of identity, but not in a way which seeks control and domination. The continual small actions of affirming and recognized identities

gradually builds toward a confident sense of cultural capital and awareness of the value of the group to the society. Often this is done through story telling, music, proverbs, drama, the public cultural rituals, and recounting the historical origins and destiny of a public. As many media analysts have noted, the networks of discussion building up around what seem to be trivial media such as women's soap opera, sports and popular music is, in fact, the cultural foundation for political action (BROWN, 1994). The affirmation of identity leads to clarity of the justice or injustice of treatment of one's group. At the most unpredictable moments, this sense of identity can blossom into decisive political action. The stage has been set and there is constant confident communication between the public and the media. When there is an opening for popular participation, the media institutions know how to support the people and the popular movements have no hesitancy in seeking out media support.

The media institution and particular journalists often set the stage and make it possible to articulate political goals and engage in decisive political action. Radio Santa Maria in the Dominican Republic had worked for years in quiet, non-political basic education programs but also affirming the identities of peasant groups. Then in 1978 a rather routine civic education campaign to assist the national election efforts opened a space to articulate a national movement toward political change. In Haiti, Radio Soleil had rather quietly articulated popular identities. Again, rather unexpectedly this translated into a widespread will to dismiss the dictatorial Duvalier government and prepare the process for popular democracy. All of these media institutions have in common their commitment to a communitarian ethos of communication. Their goals were never to gain political power or to influence the public toward political action. The goals were simply to build community confidence in cultural identities and structures of dialogue. The long-term result was to provide a foundation of democratic political action.

## Summing up: a communitarian code of professional ethics

Most specialists in media ethics feel comfortable only if a discussion of communication ethics finishes with a kind of deontological code that spells out quite clearly what professionals should and should not do in concrete circumstances. What this code might in fact look like will depend on discussions among media practitioners who are committed to a communitarian ethos of communication (WHITE, 1989). Nevertheless, it may finally make more clear the issues facing journalism ethics today to list something like a code.

1. The professional communicator believes that making truthful statements in the media are based on the ability to formulate a text that articulates the identities of publics in a way that enables those publics to recognize, affirm and reformulate their cultural identities.

2. The professional communicator is committed to articulating the sense of alienation and injustice experienced by publics so that these injustices can be dealt with and the public cultural truth can be reformulated in a more just manner.

3. The professional communicator is committed to articulate identities in a way that emphasizes the cultural capital of the groups involved but also orients these groups toward dialogue and finding common identity symbols with other groups.

4. The professional communicator is committed to gradually building in publics confidence in their identities and a sense of the just or unjust recognition of these identities so that at the opportune moment in the local or national communities these publics will fearlessly and without vengeance engage in political action to introduce a more just society.

5. The professional communicator is committed to greater attention to the more marginal groups in society and to helping these groups become more articulate in the public media.

6. The professional communicator is committed to developing a language in the public media which makes it possible not simply to present a great quantity of information but rather to present moral issues and the moral claims of different major actors so that these can be discussed.

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