A Pragmatic Method for Media Ethics

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Epistemic vs. ethical

– Confusion under "media ethics"

- Truth understood as a *moral* concept (duty, obligation, good)

(1) Epistemic: whether the message is true, justified, objective, well-founded on sources...

(2) Ethical: whether it is right to convey the message to the (intended/presumed) public

– Even when the message *is epistemically faultless*

– My focus here

Normative ethics: consequentialist theories

- Right action = action with good (or the best) consequences
  - Prevalent in media ethics (Christians 2001)
- Problem: aggregates of pleasure or other goods to not seem to match our idea of right in many cases
  - Against freedom of speech based on consequences, e.g. on children (Hurley 2004)
  - A person's private life vs. pleasure of many

Normative ethics: deontological theories

- Right action = action in accordance with duty (norm)
  - Whence duties? Broadly the *role* of the agent (Rawls, Habermas)
  - Some argue that merely *as agents* we are bound by certain rules (Korsgaard, Scanlon, Kant)
  - *A priori*: due to what it is to be _____
- Problems:
  - Particular: the role/function of media in society (e.g. Elliot & Ozar 2002) is too narrow for the whole of media ethics
  - General: duties are often outweighed by consequences, e.g. when doing "the duty" and telling the audience the truth would put them into jeopardy

Normative ethics: pragmatism

(1) The pragmatic method: elucidation of meaning by a consideration of the *conduct* that ensues of acceptance of a symbol and the *expectations* concerning experience

- *Ethical* ideas, too; but what expectations? Not observations!

(2) Normative science: we can criticize ethical ideas in light of feelings / emotions

- E.g. the outcomes of following a moral norm give rise to feelings of satisfaction or indignation

A methodical approach

– Aim: instead of testing norms or rules, method for considering a particular question and scenario: is doing X in circumstances C right?

- Identification of ethically relevant considerations (or *reasons*)

– Ideas from the other two theories can be exploited:

- *Expectations* due to social/societal roles, functions etc. (deontology)
  - *Some* of these expectations *reasonable* (duties / rights)
    - E.g. betrayal of them results in indignation
- *Results* of the action (consequentialism)
  - *Some* of these consequences *ethically relevant*

Five stages

1. The description of the assessed action and the acting agent.
   - What is being done and by whom? What is being assessed?
2. The identification of the relevant parties (stakeholders).
   - Who has expectations? To whom consequences follow?
3. The description of rights of the parties (duties).
   - What are the reasonable expectations of the parties?
4. The description of the relevant consequences of the action.
   - What foreseeable consequences are ethically relevant?
5. Weighing duties and ethically relevant consequences.
   - Do e.g. consequences outweigh a duty?

Media: stakeholders

(a) Agent / media practitioner / journalist…
(b) Audience / public
(c) The object (what the message is about)
(d) Colleagues (professional)
(e) Employer (professional)
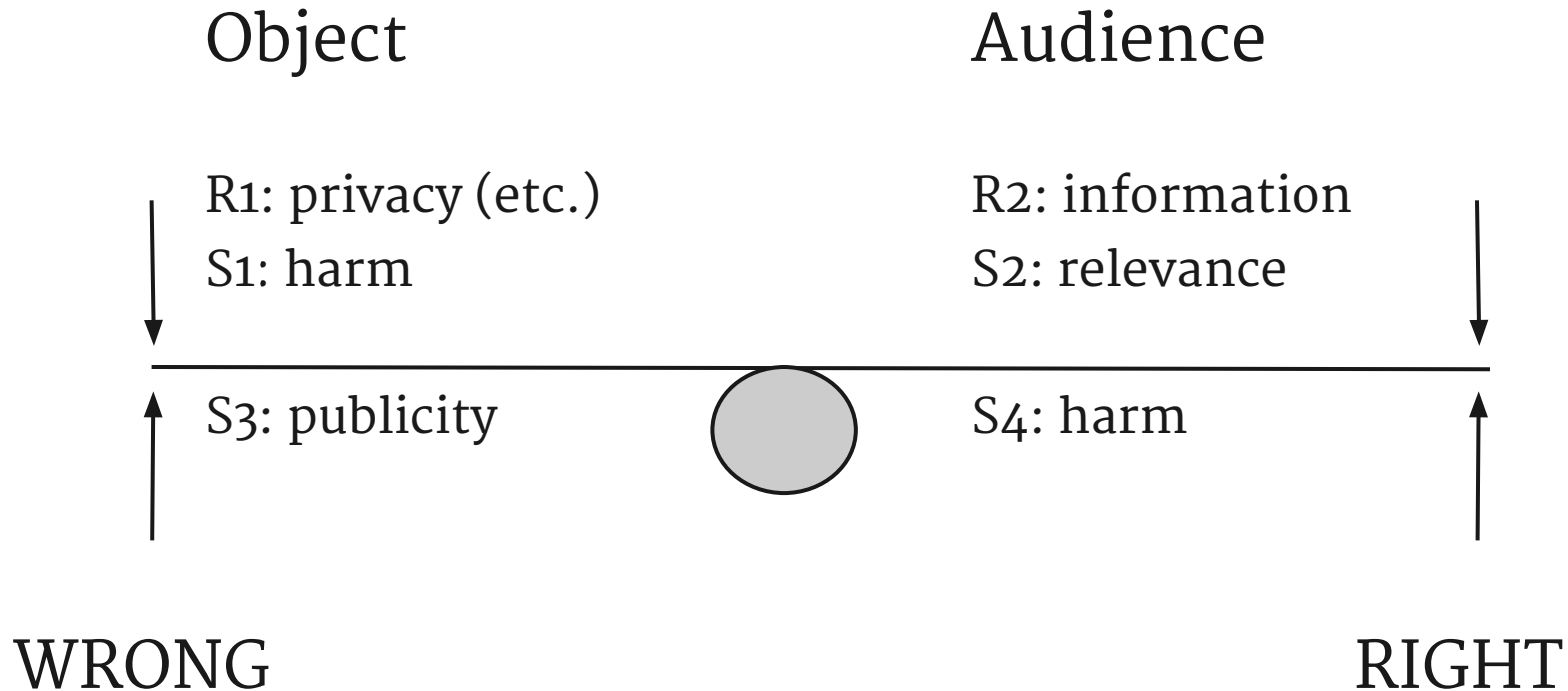
Media: main expectations and consequences

Expectations:

1. Audience: information

2. Object: respect for privacy, justice…

(3. Agent: freedom of speech)

Consequences:

1. Audience: harm, danger, displeasure (negative)

2. Object: deserved or desired publicity (positive)

3. Object: harm, danger, displeasure (negative)

Results: the seesaw model ("right or wrong to convey a message?")

Object

Audience

R1: privacy (etc.)
S1: harm

R2: information
S2: relevance

S3: publicity

S4: harm

WRONG

RIGHT

Recap

(1) Epistemic vs. ethical

(2) Pragmatism as an alternative to deontology and consequentialism (etc.)

(3) The five-step procedure as an aid with particular questions / circumstances

(4) Main results on media expressible as a seesaw model