

# A Seesaw Model for Media Ethics

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# Two main questions of media ethics

## 1. Epistemic:

- Truth
- Justification
- “Honesty”

=> Corresponding virtues of a media agent

## 2. **Ethical (narrowly)**

- Whether it is right or wrong to convey a message (even if epistemically faultless)

# Reasons

- Intended as a term *neutral* between different ethical theories
- Considerations that may count for and against a particular course of action
  - Countervailing reasons
  - Undermining reasons
- Ethical reasons = (normative) reasons for action

# 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
- Problems:
  - Particular: the role/function of media (or media agents) 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

# Combining the theories

- Deontology: *expectations* due to social/societal roles, functions etc.
  - *Some* of these expectations *reasonable*, underwriting duties and rights
- Consequentialism: *results* of the action
  - *Some* of these consequences *ethically relevant*, underwriting goodness

# Media: stakeholders

- (a) Agent / media practitioner / journalist...
- (b) Audience / public
- (c) Object (what the message is about)
- (d) Colleagues (professional)
- (e) Employer (professional)

# Media: main expectations and consequences

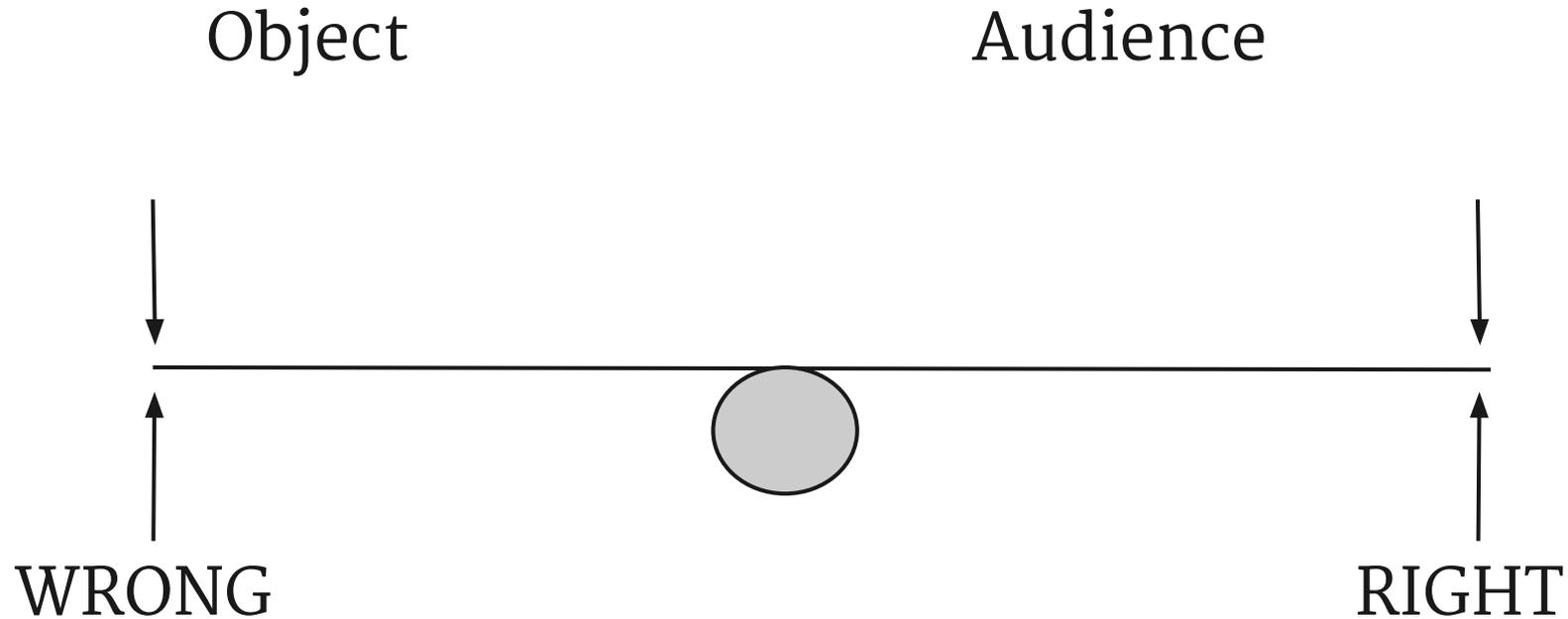
## Expectations:

1. Audience: information
2. Object: respect for privacy, justice...
- (3. Agent: freedom of speech)

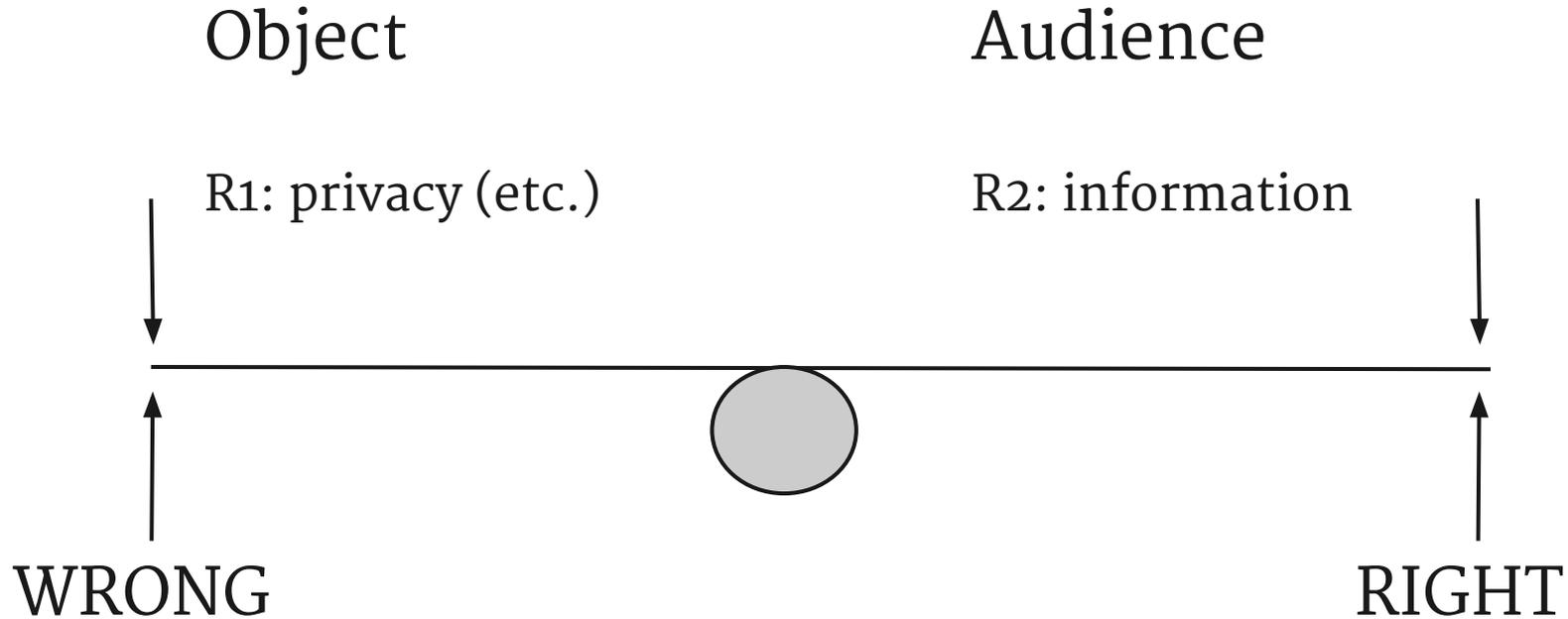
## Consequences:

1. Audience: harm, danger, displeasure (negative)
2. Object: deserved or desired publicity (positive)
3. Object: harm, danger, displeasure (negative)

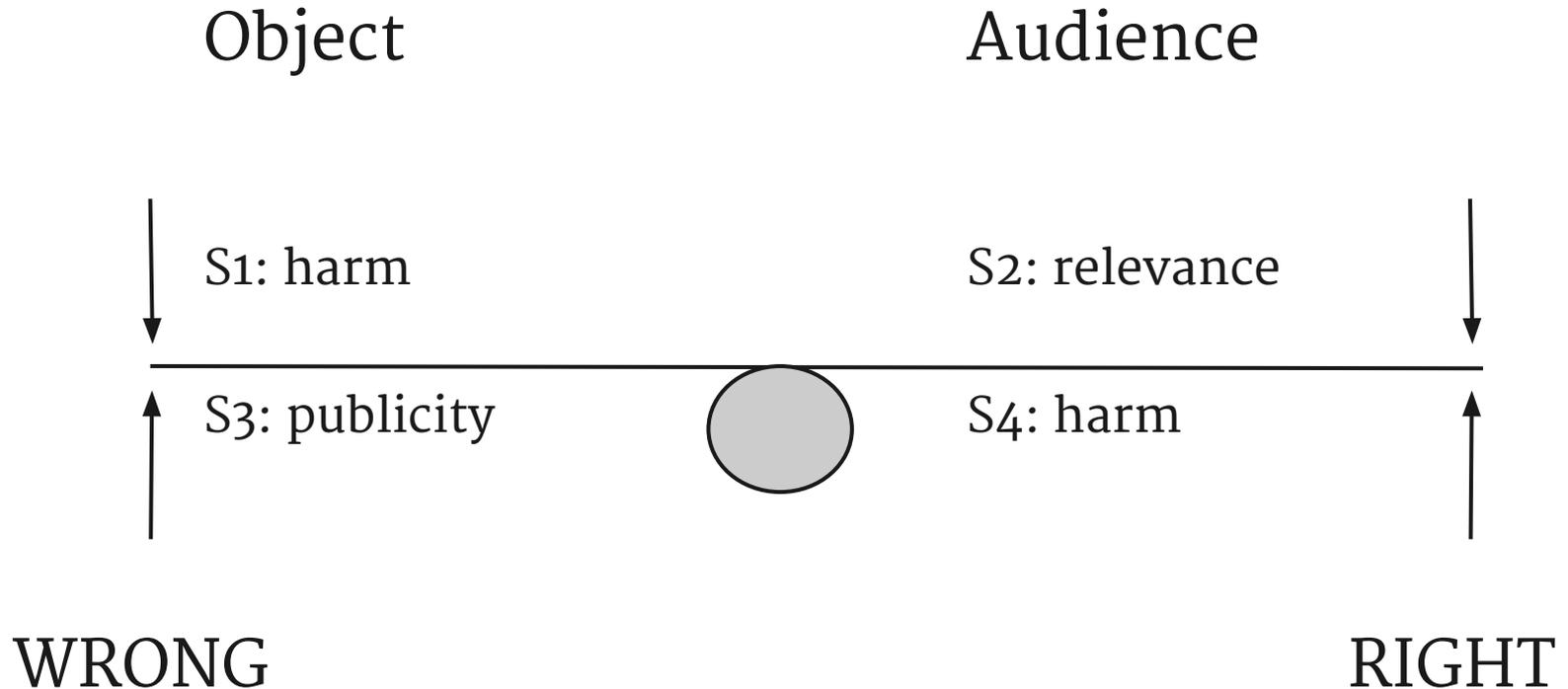
# The seesaw: object and audience



# Rights of object and audience



# Consequences: object and audience



# The whole seesaw

Object

Audience

R1: privacy (etc.)

R2: information

S1: harm

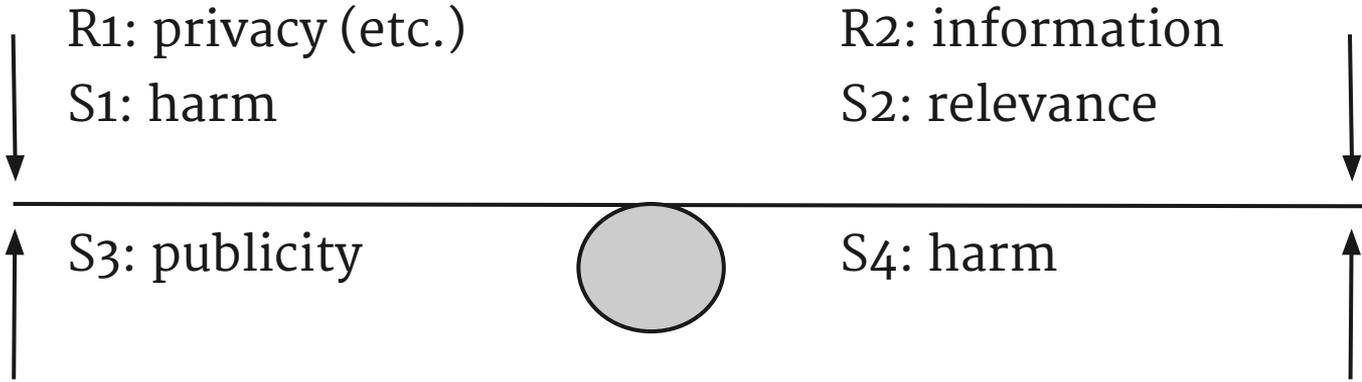
S2: relevance

S3: publicity

S4: harm

WRONG

RIGHT



# Recap

- (1) Epistemic vs. ethical
- (2) Reasons as a theory-neutral ethical concept
- (3) Different main theories underwriting different reasons to be taken into account
- (4) Results expressible as a seesaw model