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**Bridging the Credibility Gap:
Why Canadian Journalists
Should be Licensed**

by Jennifer Braaksma, B.J.

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

**School of Canadian Studies
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

April 1999

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**The undersigned recommend to the Faculty
of Graduate Studies and Research acceptance of the thesis**

**“Bridging the Credibility Gap: Why Canadian
Journalists Should be Licensed”**

submitted by Jennifer Braaksma, B.J.

**in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

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May 1999

Abstract

This paper argues that journalists should be licensed because the public, which depends on the media for information to participate in democracy has the right to know and understand the moral values, context, education and bias of journalists. A licence will give the public a standard by which to judge, evaluate and interpret the information they receive through the media and provide a path of redress should the public feel the media are not living up to the standards.

Journalism is a public trust, considering how essential the media are in democracy. Focusing on Canadian newspapers' role in society, the paper looks at the media's recent loss of credibility and the need for trust among readers. Examining media ethics, the paper suggests that subjectivism is gaining ground in its struggle with objectivity. As a result, current systems of accountability such as press councils don't work as well as licensing could.

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There may be only one author to this piece of work, but there have been many people holding up my pen as I wrote.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The lofty ideal of Canadian journalism, most specifically that of the Canadian newspaper business, can be eloquently summarized by the Canadian Newspaper Association's Statement of Principles:

Freedom of the press is an exercise of every Canadian's right to freedom of expression guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is the right to gather and disseminate information, to discuss, to advocate, to dissent. A free press is essential to readers to use their Charter right to receive information and to make informed judgments on the issues and ideas of their time.

The newspaper's primary obligation is fidelity to the public good.

The newspaper has responsibilities to its readers, its shareholders, its employees and its advertisers. But the operation of a newspaper is a public trust and its overriding responsibility is to the society it serves. (www.cna-acj.ca, 1999).

The perception of the media by the Canadian public reveals a much starker picture.

According to the Angus Reid polling firm, two out of three Canadians think the media are guilty of sensationalizing scandals, and more than one-third (35 per cent) have actually boycotted certain media because of their reporting of stories involving the Princess of Wales, Clinton and others. Almost two-thirds (65 per cent) feel reporters delve too deeply into the personal lives of public figures. (Posner, p. C1, 1998)

Further polls indicate the journalism industry is losing the respect of the people it not only serves, but needs as paying customers. A report in the *Globe and Mail* in the fall of 1998 found that journalists ranked fifth from the bottom of 13 "professions" evaluated for respect. Small business owners were first, politicians were last. But what's more disturbing, however, is the comparison between that poll and a similar

one conducted five years ago. It says journalists were the only group of the eight measured in both surveys that registered a consistent decline. (Armstrong et al., p. A3, 1998).

The reality no doubt lies somewhere between the two extremes, but the yawning gap between what the journalists expect of themselves and what their audiences believe they're receiving is a concern.

Perhaps in other types of businesses or services, the discrepancies between the producers and consumers might not be of such great consideration to the general public. But the media play a unique role in society; they are the means by which the average citizen gathers information to effectively participate in a democratic system. Without information disseminated by the media, individuals would find themselves in a blind, uneducated position to judge, vote, take action or evaluate their communities and society.

The orthodox view of the role of news and information in a democratic society can be metaphorically viewed as three legs of a tripod—the public, its government, and the news media. The government is elected and responsible to the public. People rely on the media for news about government, the courts, stock markets, the economy, the physical environment (consider the humble weather forecast) medicine, industry and employment. A majority of the public trusts the news to be “the truth”... With news as part of its mental apparatus, the public is in a position to intervene in an informed and responsible way to keep government honest and efficient... Accepting this myth, the citizen perhaps naively allows that news plays an important role in the ongoing enterprise of a democratic society...

Too often the news media have reflected only the interests of the wealthy; too often they have distorted events or provided one-sided coverage. (Bird, p.2, 1997)

But who decides what is distorted, what is one-sided? Who declares a story fair and balanced? Would a subject of an article, perhaps under attack, not cry foul, while those affected by the subject's actions claim the media got it right?

It becomes a matter of perspective. Individuals, with their own biases and backgrounds, will respond to the media in as many ways as there are people. The same holds true of the journalists, as well. Reporters, editors and publishers produce a story based on their own, and their organization's perception. Consider the possibility of a story about a court ruling in favour of a company against a union. One newspaper, with a known conservative ideology, such as Conrad Black's chain of newspapers, might choose a headline announcing the company wins. On the other hand, a paper with a more liberal bent, perhaps the *Toronto Star*, might headline its story with the fact that the union loses. Each story would be factually accurate, but the readers nonetheless are left with a bias consciously chosen by the paper.

Individual journalists also run into the question of bias, as the recent CBC-TV controversy over reporter Terry Milewski's involvement with a source illustrates. The question of Milewski's distance from a story accusing the federal government of allegedly interfering with the Constitutional rights of protesters at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November, 1997, raises concerns about what readers and viewers can expect from journalists. While the CBC ombudsmen cleared Milewski of any charges brought forward by the Prime Minister's office, the issue of media responsibility remains on the table.

The ethics of the media are then trotted out to address such concerns. While individuals must face ethical decisions in their own lives, decisions where there may not be a clear-cut right or wrong answer, journalists encounter ethical situations unique to their work. How far into the private life of a news subject should they go? Should anonymous sources be used in a story, and if so, how far should members of the media go to protect that anonymity? How sensational should a story get, especially if the competition begins to sensationalize it? Ethical awareness, and how to come to tough decisions about ethical dilemmas are important components to journalism training that is slowly starting to gain acceptance among the industry (Rupert, personal interview, 1998).

Nevertheless, the ethics that journalists follow are traditionally steeped in their own society's moral principles.

Fundamental...to most societies are the basic moral principles of good and evil, truth-telling, promise-keeping, justice, gratitude, generosity, reparation, self-improvement, and not injuring others. For such principles to work well, a good deal of freedom is required. Freedom to speak out and to keep silent; freedom to respect others and to be respected...

These freedoms imply trust: the belief that the other parties involved will deal as fairly as oneself. Whatever the role of the journalist is, it will not work without the trust of the audience credibility...And whatever the consumers of news see as the role of the media, a primary requirement is information on which they can base their life decisions. There is an expectation that the media will be honest and fair in providing the truth...(Russell, p. 4, 1994)

Whose truth to believe, then? If news stories are subject to interpretation, where does that leave the reader? Objectivity, long since the ideal of twentieth-century journalism has been battle-scarred with its struggle against subjectivity. Itself a slippery word to define, objectivity, taken in the context of this paper, is an ideology

that “suggests that journalists can stand apart from events without influencing them and transfer the truth or meaning of events to the news audience by means of neutral language.....it follows that it must be possible to separate facts from values and the observer from the observed” (Hackett et al., p. 84, 1998). Many critics, including Hackett, and his co-author Zhao agree this is impossible (Hackett et al., p. 83, 1998). But that is not to say the goals to which many journalists strive—and associate with objectivity—such as fairness, balance, and accurate reporting, are not enviable qualities. On the contrary, objectivity alone does not have a monopoly on the methods by which a newscast is put together. These practices are also adaptable to a subjective realm: they can be done to the best of the journalist’s own ability, perception and bias. Instead, the focus of objectivity here is that of an epistemology—a set of assumptions about knowledge and reality.

Subjectivity relates to the perception of events, activities and people. It encourages an atmosphere of greater self-awareness and reflection to understand the connection between the individual’s view point and the broad range of others’ beliefs. “In [Vision TV producer Rita] Deverell’s view, the central challenge of reporting is not ‘being objective, standing above reality as if we were not involved in it,’ but rather ‘accurately revealing and assessing our subjectivity and the subjectivity of others knowing where ‘we’ stand in relation to ‘them’” (Hackett et al., p. 185, 1998). The purpose of criticizing objectivity, then, is not to dismiss the positive attributes that it has adopted, such as the search for facts to contextualize a story, or fair representation of news sources, but instead, to highlight that the underlying notion of

detached observer is not only impossible, but also in serious question, as Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao explain. “[In journalism, t]here is now less naive realism, less acceptance of the self-evident nature of facts, a greater sense of skepticism and irony, more tolerance for a broader range of approaches covering the news and more scope for the voices of the reporters themselves. Journalism has become more explicitly interpretive” (Hackett et al., p. 82, 1998).

It wasn’t always like that. In the early 1800’s, with publishers looking for more readers to sell to advertisers as a way to increase circulation, they declared themselves politically neutral. Objectivity was born, but in a mono-paternal culture, where white, middle-class men held power with little concern for the views of women and minorities. With the rising growth of feminism and civil liberties in the past few decades, the notion of subjectivity has gained ground in its effort to convince the media industry of objectivity’s impossibility.

But the argument of subjectivity resides in a larger philosophical context of moral relativism. If news stories are open for interpretation, so, too, are larger issues, including the idea of right and wrong. One society’s values could starkly contrast with another’s—consider that capital punishment is illegal in Canada, yet regularly practiced in many states in the U.S. But moral relativism does not mean “anything goes”. Each person’s version seems just and true to him or her. The difference lies in the tolerance of understanding that someone else may feel differently, that what the other believes to be right could be the opposite.

Moral relativism claims...there is no single true morality. There are many

different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others. Moral relativism rejects moral nihilism and asserts instead...morality should not be abandoned...relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking...[moral relativism] is made possible by actual moral diversity. (Harman, p. 5-6, 1996)

But if all is relative, if the news is open to interpretation, how then, can the public effectively use the media to understand and make decisions about the society in which it operates? It can't. Instead, context is required. A standard by which society lives, a baseline of values, morals or ideals by which the majority abide is necessary for order, for understanding. In a relative world, a standard, agreed upon by most, will not be accepted by all. But it gives the majority nonetheless a guideline from which to judge. The law is, of course, the prime example. And a guideline from which to judge also includes a method of accountability. While there can be recognition that those who disagree with the standard have their own opinion, if they choose not to follow the standard in place, there will be consequences. Morality may be relative, but one version still remains dominant.

Therefore, in a society which harbours relativism, in an industry of paramount importance to democracy which struggles with subjectivity and bias, in a relationship of deteriorating trust, how then, to reconcile the credibility gap between journalists (a term meant to include editors with whom more decision-making power usually lies than the reporter) and the increasingly disillusioned public?

License the journalists. They should be licensed because the public, which depends on the media for information to participate in a democracy has the right to know and understand the moral values, context, education and bias of journalists. A license will

give the public a standard by which to judge, evaluate and interpret the information they receive through the media and provide a path of redress should the public feel the media are not living up to the standards. Journalism is a public trust.

The proposal is of course, not without controversy in journalistic circles. A frequently heard argument against licensing is the potential of restrictions on freedom of expression as guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Section 2b guarantees “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of information” (Martin et al., p. 1, 1994).

But the *Charter* is not absolute. “[It] guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society” (Martin, p. 29, 1997). This leaves room not only to uphold the freedom of expression, but also to protect the public. As John Miller says, “too often [freedom of the press] is invoked as a shield to protect journalists who invade our privacy or newspapers that make huge profits out of publishing the results. It is almost never brought up as a public value until there is a juicy story to cover that might sell more papers” (Miller, p. 108, 1998).

A licensing system for journalists would not include government involvement. Journalism would become a self-regulating profession along the same lines as doctors, lawyers and engineers. Inherent in those jobs is a duty to the public. The knowledge they have is specialized enough that members of the public would not be able to easily obtain it, and the type of knowledge they possess instructs public safety. The idea is confidence. An individual going to a licensed doctor has confidence that the

person with whom he or she is dealing has met and is expected to live up to a strict set of standards. The doctor, therefore, is seen by the public as knowledgeable, ethical and above all, trustworthy. Since there is already a regulatory body in place specifically designed to look after the public's interest, there is no need for the individual to take extreme measures—such as learning an entire body of medical knowledge— as a way of determining the competency of the doctor.

Journalists, too, fill a similar role of knowledge experts. The task of each person to learn every current event would be overwhelming, so instead, the public turns to the journalists to wade through the information, decipher it, filter it, and finally, present it in a succinct package. With the information overload present in the ever-growing technological society, a great number of people still prefer some interpretation.

While that interpretation of raw data is a useful and vital skill, it means that some information, story or event is left out. The journalists play the role as gatekeepers. Perhaps necessary, or at least wanted gatekeepers, but gatekeepers nonetheless. The idea of licensing journalists is to make the news gathering process more transparent to the consumers. The readers, or viewers, would then know and understand the standards by which media outlets operate.

The standards of the system itself would reflect similar journalism ideology of accurate, fair, honest, independent and ethical reporting. While the specifics must be left to further research because the amount of detail needed to provide an appropriate answer is not part of the scope of this thesis, the paper will offer some idea of how such a system might be implemented in the conclusion. It would be necessary to poll

journalists, editors, publishers, advertisers, readers, government and businesses about their expectations, compare them to the codes of conduct already in place, examine them in relation to other countries with similar systems, ensure no rights or treaties are being violated, and discuss the results in an open forum before determining the specific details.

Registered journalists would be expected to adhere to the decided standards, but the proposal is not suggesting publication be limited only to licensed journalists. Take newspapers as an example. The press would be as free to print anything written as it is today. The difference would be in a newspaper byline. A licensed journalist becomes registered, as in the case with a registered nurse (R.N.). The stories written by that reporter would include his or her name, followed by the designation (perhaps R. J., for registered journalist). A reader, seeing the letters, would know that the reporter has had a certain amount of education in journalism, knows how to write well, knows how to research and interview well, and knows how to put stories into context. The reader would also know that the journalist has been trained in the ethics of the profession. And, just as importantly, if the reader feels that the reporter has broken the standards, he or she has the option of instigating disciplinary action (if deemed warranted by the regulatory body). On the other hand, if a reader comes across the name of a writer without the designation, he or she would not know of the author's training. It is conceivable that the writer is merely an unregistered journalist, with all the same training and education as his or her licensed counterpart, or the

writer could have a hidden motivation for the article, or be incompetent. A licensing system would eliminate the guesswork for the reader.

And it is the reader this paper is most concerned with. The thesis concentrates on the Canadian newspaper industry, specifically, as opposed to the broadcast media. While the concept of an "R. J." would, in effect, work the same way for radio and T.V. journalists, the focus remains on newspapers. The reason for this is, most broadly, to use only one medium as an example. Consider this look at Canadian newspapers as a conceptual pilot for the proposal to license all journalists. The scope of the thesis, it was decided, should reside in the concept of licensing and accountability, as opposed to the specific requirements for each medium. The secondary, and less vital reasons for concentrating on newspapers, is the fact that they are much less regulated by government laws than broadcast T.V. and radio newscasts, by virtue of their media, are subject to other regulatory bodies such as the Canadian Radio Television-Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). It is not the intent of this paper to argue the merits or drawbacks of such regulations, only to acknowledge that there is at least the perception of a watchdog for T.V. and radio stations. It is true that the CRTC does not look specifically to individual newscasts, hence, its mandate is much different than the proposed licensing body, but the decision to focus on newspapers remains one of scope. As well, broadcast media run into a whole different set of ethical standards and audience expectations than print journalism. Pictures and sound, which can be dramatic and influential, add another

element to the licensing proposal which should be duly examined should a standard ever be more closely investigated.

The focus, as mentioned, is the reader. This, opposed to the viewer or listener, but also opposed to the journalists themselves. The licensing of journalists obviously affects very deeply the professional core of the industry, but it has an impact and influence on the readers as well. The argument, can therefore, concentrate on the justification of licensing for the reporters and editors—what specific types of ethical issues are of most importance to their work, and how to resolve them—or it could examine the benefit to the reader. Both viewpoints are intertwined and not easily untangled, yet the subtle difference in focus leads this paper somewhat away from details about how journalists perform their duties and closer to how their end results influence the public.

The licensing system, is not, of course, foolproof. As this thesis is taking newspapers as its example, not all stories are accompanied by bylines. That is, however, more of the exception than the rule. And how could an unregistered reporter get work if editors would be more inclined to stay the “safe” course with a licensed journalist? It is a pitfall of any tough job market, and one that has no satisfactory answer, except to say that a writer now, without any such licensing system, would be hard pressed to get published without a journalism education or experience.

But if the focus here remains on the concept of setting a standard for journalists, specifically print reporters, in light of the benefit for the readers, details about the procedure for deciding the specific standards and instigating how the system of

accountability is to work should be left to further study. Among the issues which could cause difficulty in the application is the question of disciplining those who disregard the standards. Some commentary on the way in which a licence could be put into practice will come in the conclusion, however, the scope of this thesis is not to outline the blueprint of a licensing system for journalists, but to argue for the merits of the concept in a broader context.

The method in which this paper will attempt to do just that is as follows: The second chapter will put the media into a societal context by arguing that its role in a democracy is imperative to the public.

As an instrument of democracy, journalism has played a critical role over the centuries in the struggle of people to free their societies from autocratic Tudor kings and communist dictators alike. It has become the most powerful product in the world and one of the most profitable. The arrival of mass communication induced the biggest change in the history of human awareness... But our role is too important to society as a whole for us to evade rigorous self-examination. (Nash, p. 10, 1998)

With a brief statistical look at the newspaper industry in Canada as background information, the thesis turns to the conceptual notion of the public sphere as described by Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher. The idea he advocates is a body of private citizens who, through discussion, form a public. The media is integral to that process.

The point of this chapter is context, so it will examine periods in North American journalism's history relating to the business of news and its sometimes tenuous relationship to the public, including historical objectivity and agendas in the media.

There will be comment on the public discussion of Canadian media, from the 1970 report of the special Senate Committee on the mass media, chaired by Senator Keith Davey, and the 1980-81 Royal Commission on Newspapers, or the Kent Commission. The latter took a close look at the concentration of ownership in the daily press, a phenomenon that exists still and continues to affect the organizational direction of the newspapers. Such concentration threatens to increase the influence of advertisers on publishers and editors who may feel more pressure to please them; an issue that also has important ramifications for the bias of news organizations and individual journalists as Carleton University Journalism professor Roger Bird explains in his book *The End of News*.

Thomson Newspapers is owned by a corporation that owns—to pick a couple of fragments—The Bay and Zellers, both major retail chains. This ownership has affected attitudes toward the news in a way that did not occur in the past.... What attitude toward retailers, retailing and the clash between advertising and editorial will Thomson newspapers display given the position of The Bay in Thomson organizations?

Whatever the professional integrity of journalists at...Thomson's *Globe and Mail* in Toronto, perceptive readers or viewers might find themselves wondering... about the shape of the news agenda. They might wonder, in a landscape dominated by such powerful forces, who is looking out for their interests (Bird, p. 32, 1997).

Lastly, as evidence that the newspaper industry itself recognizes the importance of public participation and accountability, there will be a discussion of the burgeoning role of “public journalism”, also known as advocacy, or civic journalism. Meant to include citizens in the reportage and publication of local dailies, public journalism lays claim to a much more open approach to newsgathering.

Chapter Three illustrates the timeliness of a discussion to license journalists. In the recent past, with news stories turning into events taking on a life of their own, the public has grown much more wary of the way the media have reported on events. From the non-stop coverage of the O.J. Simpson murder trial in the early 1990s, through the continuous reporting in the wake of Princess Diana's death and the ceaseless examination of U.S. President Bill Clinton's sexual affair with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, the public has begun to question the sensationalistic methods used by newsgatherers. But can they take all the blame, if the media outlets insist that they are simply giving the public what it wants? Should the faceless public take a closer look in the mirror before pointing fingers?

Canadians, bombarded with American and international news events also have their own sensational stories to examine, from the heated controversy over Paul Bernardo's murder trial of two teenage girls, to the sad tragedy of the 1998 Swiss Air crash over Canadian waters which claimed the lives of 229 people.

But the polls continue to indicate a decline in media credibility. How can the media continue to be a useful influence in society if its trust with the public is eroding? Or is the recent concern as newsworthy as all that in the light of the nineteenth century's history of "yellow journalism?"

Issues of Canadian newspaper's role as private businesses and public watchdog will also be addressed. Do they conflict? Should they?

Finally, a more in-depth look at the Milewski affair will detail some of the questions most recently raised by the controversy.

Chapter Four begins to examine the morality and ethics behind the work of journalists and, more specifically, how it affects the reader. Morality and ethics are very closely tied together, in definition, context and meaning. One, morality, is the concern with human behaviour, specifically the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad; the other, ethics, is the study of the moral value of human conduct and the rules and principles that govern it (Collins, p. 834, 425, 1989). The two words are therefore, intricately woven to create a vocabulary to discuss the issues of right and wrong and standards by which to judge or evaluate those actions. Ethics may be the principles that guide behaviour, but they only carry meaning if they are taken from a moral framework.

Moral is derived from the Latin, *mos, moris*, meaning “way of life” or “conduct”. It is often associated with religious beliefs and personal behaviour. Ethics...is derived from the Greek *ethos* meaning “custom”, “usage” or “character”. Ethics often involves the balancing of competing rights when there is no “correct” answer (Day, p. 2, 1997).

While the two words do differ, the context of the paper focuses both on personal behaviour based on a set of beliefs—for journalists and readers—and on the rules used to apply those morals. Therefore, ethics and morality are often used together to signify their dependent relationship to one another. Without morals, the rules, the use—or ethics—would not be necessary, and without use, the beliefs or behaviour—morals—would not be demonstrated.

Morals and ethics, together, work in an ideal world without restrictions, as one keeps the other in check, but of course, there is no such thing as an ideal world. Instead, outside limitations, such as professional codes of ethics telling its members

how to act, must sometimes be imposed. This can be contradictory: freedom of individuals to act as they see morally fit conflicting with a set of rules determined by others. To keep a balance, to compromise and moderate, middle-ground is needed. This paper, therefore, presents the view that there is, and must be a recognition of different moral frameworks, while at the same time acknowledging that some common ground in the form of a standard of ethics is necessary in such a public industry like journalism.

Legal issues arise from both moral and ethical dilemmas, but the focus here is not on the legality of journalists' actions, rather the process, method and values through which journalists arrive at decisions that may seem like there is no "correct" answer.

Education and awareness on the part of both journalist and reader about ethical principles, and media systems will better root a debate about the merits of setting a standard the readers can use to judge their news coverage.

Values also play an important role in decision-making, whether it's an examination of an ethical dilemma or a simple routine assignment.

Our values constitute the frame of reference in which theories, decisions and situations make sense to us.

Values motivate human action. Values are a distinctive mark of the human species. But our values are never pure. We tend to become defensive about them and typically rationalize our behaviour when we violate them. Professional values are inscribed in power. (Christians et al., p. 9, 1995)

The thesis argues there are social responsibilities and journalistic obligations on the part of a newspaper which must be taken into account when moral decisions and media ethics are being considered. The various methods of moral reasoning, from

Potter's Box, to S.A.D. (Situation, Analysis, Definition) show how to do just that so the journalist can remain as faithful to the reader, his organization and him/herself as much as possible. These practical methods of problem-solving could be incorporated into the type of education a licensed journalist might expect, so the public is aware such a conscious, thoughtful system through which to deal with ethical dilemmas actually exists.

The discussion in the fifth chapter turns more philosophical, as the thesis looks at moral relativism and the notion of truth in greater detail.

Truth, an abstract concept central to the journalistic ideal, is just as fraught with pitfalls as objectivity.

Truth itself is a slippery subject [and] often difficult...ascertaining what is true is complex. Truth may be further compromised by deliberate attempts to trick the media. It can also be jeopardized by several newsroom driven events: recreation of news events (docudramas or simulations) to make the news more entertaining, dubious reporting techniques (such as lying to obtain information which can be driven by desperation or competition...) (Russell, p. 89, 1994)

This paper argues, not that a licensing standard is an example of moral relativity at work, but instead, as a way out of the sea of subjectivity. While no story will be without bias or interpretation, on the part of the reporter or reader, a standard will attempt to explicitly lay out the morality, as defined by a "way of life, a behaviour" (see p. 13), ethics, or the use of such behaviour, and standards of the majority. This, as a result, will lead the reader to a better understanding of the professionalism of news reporting, who can then judge a story accordingly. Moral relativism, while creating an atmosphere of tolerance, cannot operate strictly on its own. A standard,

an “absolute” is needed in conjunction with the recognition of relativism in order for the reader to reap the most benefit from the news. In a relative world, the licensing system will never be perfect, nor satisfy everyone, but it becomes, at the very least, a guideline for moral and ethical behaviour.

In the final chapter before the conclusion, the thesis addresses the issue of accountability. If there is a standard in place to which journalists must adhere, then there is a related system of accountability.

If we set ourselves up as guardians of the public trust, we ought to make sure we're respected. A system of licensing would go a long way to redressing [our credibility].

Journalism is not a profession now because it lacks the criteria: an industry-wide code of ethics, education standards, and a governing body to enforce those standards.

There's no accountability and that's a problem. (Pohle, personal interview, 1999)

Of course there are methods of accountability in place now, but too often they are ineffective and costly. Letters to the editor, for example, are still culled by the media staff themselves, while suing a newspaper, placing an ad to counteract bad press, or starting up a newspaper are simply too expensive for most individuals.

Many newspapers have ombudsmen, a “reader representative” whose role is to address complaints by readers. The theory is sound, but examples of negative consequences experienced by ombudsmen who ruled against their employer, the newspaper, calls into question the effectiveness of the position.

Codes of ethics are a step in the right direction. But the newspapers which do have them don't necessarily require their journalists to read, let alone comply with them.

And the fact that each media outlet has its own can create confusion among the readers, to whom they should be addressed along with the journalist.

Press councils, as two federal government reports on the status of the media recommended, are the closest method of accountability to the proposed system of licensing. Set up by member newspapers to hear and adjudicate complaints from the public (as well as from journalists about the public), its mandate is aligned with the goals and objectives of proper accountability and high professional standards. Unfortunately, the press councils have no teeth. They cannot enforce any decision they make, nullifying their effectiveness. Another problem lies in the fact that few members of the public are aware of them.

After a brief discussion of Canadian laws that relate to the media, and a look at the mandate by which other professions such as lawyers and engineers work, the chapter will then focus its attention on the success—and the occasional failure—of some licensing systems in Latin American countries. The paper will then comment on some general issues which both make licensing a necessity and give some idea as to what such a practice would look like.

The conclusion, finally, will summarize how journalism, as a public trust, should be licensed to provide both readers and practitioners a standard by which they can evaluate and interpret their work.

Chapter Two

The Importance of Media in Democracy: Canadian Newspaper's Role in Society

Knowledge is power. It is the media's job to collect the information that is then turned into a knowledge and understanding useful to the public.

Without accurate information about the views and values of candidates for office, a citizenry cannot cast intelligent ballots; without adequate coverage of the operation of a government between elections, the attentive populace cannot effectively monitor the performance of their chosen representative. A public with information available to it is not an informed public...there is a difference between the "informational citizen" saturated with bits and bytes of information and the informed citizen, the person who has not only the information but a point of view and preferences with which to make sense of it. (Schudson, p. 27, 1995)

As of December, 1998, Canadians had 105 general interest daily newspapers from which to learn about and take an interest in their democratic system at work. With a total daily circulation of 5.2 million copies, making that one in five Canadians receiving a daily newspaper, the potential influence papers have on the way Canadians view their democracy is great, especially through the amount of information readers must cull through in their bid to learn about their communities and society. It equates to more than 300,000 words for the average 100 page paper, or the equivalent reading material of three full-length novels (www.cna.acj.ca).

Which stories Canadians choose to read within each paper may not make much of a case for a variety of voices being heard in print because of the ever-increasing

concentration of ownership. With Hollinger, the Conrad Black company which owns Southam, having control of 60 of the 105 dailies, a diversity of ideological bias in Canadian newspapers is in question. Reputed to have a right-wing conservative tendency, the Black chain of papers would have more influence than the next largest chain, the Sun Media Corps., with 11 newspapers. Thomson owns nine papers, and only 11 independent daily newspapers are privately published (www.cna-acj.ca).

Despite corporate boardroom maneuverings, Canadian readers continue to pick up their newspapers. According to a 1998 NADbank study, at least nine million Canadians read a newspaper daily, or 59.5 per cent. It found readership among men remained high at 64.8 per cent, but dropped to 54.5 per cent of women. At least 11 million Canadian adults, or 75 per cent read a newspaper Monday to Friday, including 78.7 per cent of readers in the 18-24 age group. Just under nine million Canadians read a Sunday paper and 12.1 million Canadians read either a Saturday or Sunday paper. The lowest percentage of readership was 25-34, with only 51 per cent reading it weekly (www.cna-acj.ca).

But numbers have been dropping.

Since the recession took hold in the early 1990s, a disturbing total of 622,000 customers have stopped buying newspapers every day in this country. That's a drop of 11 per cent, or 3.7 million fewer papers being sold per week by an industry that depends financially on being able to deliver customers to advertisers...Canada's ten largest dailies collectively lost a total of 2.2 million sales per week in that period and not one of them gained (Miller, p. 10, 1998)

It's a concern for newspaper owners and journalists alike. According to Miller in his 1998 book *Yesterday's News* new technology may be partly responsible. He says

in 1998, at least 37 per cent of Canadians had access to the Internet (Miller, p. 10, 1998). It is conceivable that more and more people are turning to the web for their information. Could that diminish the newspaper's role as interpreter and travel guide through the mounds of raw data available through cyberspace? Quite possibly, but the newspaper industry is betting on the presence, in great numbers, of people who would not consider themselves "information junkies" and hence, are looking for packaged, succinct and informative news stories.

But for all its importance in the role of democratic influencer, the media wear another hat that dresses up a different, yet just as vital function of democracy. In a free market economy, newspapers are still businesses, out to make a profit. While journalism is a public trust, responsible for providing the public with accurate, useful information, the press is constantly under pressure to keep circulation up as a way to attract more advertisers. The danger—sometimes real—is that the news story becomes filler for the advertising space. Other ethical dilemmas can arise from the threat of advertisers' boycotts over negative stories, harmful copy, or simply news that displeases the advertiser with the purse strings. These real concerns, of greater interest to editors, still affect the readers if they believe the news they're receiving has been white-washed, tainted, or otherwise influenced by advertisers. Yet again, perception can sometimes be more harmful than reality, since most newsrooms have strict policies about the arms-length relationship between editorial and advertising. A standard, knowable to the public, about just such policies would go a long way to eliminating potential perception conflicts. As Miller says, "[f]or us to believe

ourselves well-served by our press, we need to understand the standards by which they gather news” (Miller, p. 115, 1998). His concerns about the media voluntarily accepting such a proposition however, run deep. “Yet this concept is as foreign to the minds of Canadian publishers and editors as the quaint notion that newspapers are, above all else, a public trust. They go to extraordinary lengths to hide what they do from public scrutiny” (Miller, p. 115, 1998).

It may not be a sound business strategy to ignore criticisms. If the polls showing the loss of media credibility are correct, how long will readers continue to buy a product in which they no longer believe? It is the average citizen, after all, who will decide the fate of newspapers.

Gillain Stewart, former managing editor of the *Calgary Herald* understands this idea very well. As John Miller explains in *Yesterday's News*, Stewart and her staff looked to marketing research to learn what readers wanted when the paper began losing circulation in the late 1980s. “‘Community news’ rated so highly it almost went off the scale, and she and her editors looked at each other in amazement. Wasn’t that what they were already doing--giving them local news? What all the editors missed, Stewart realizes now, was that readers had a different concept of community than they did” (Miller, p. 16, 1998).

The power of the average citizen has been well documented by the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. His notion of the “public sphere” gives the individual a role to play in the way the world works. While democracy might sound altruistic, with the *people* running their own affairs through representational government, a lot

of it is just talk. The power instead, resides with the elite in government, leaving out the people themselves. Habermas, however, envisioned his public sphere as a body of private citizens gathered to form the public. A modern-day coffee-house exemplifies Habermas's idea of people assembled to talk, to discuss ideas of politics and current events, to communicate. Regular conversations have the power to distill relevant political theories, revolutionary new strategies or revealing new policies. The public, therefore, has more right to its discourse than the current media takes into account.

Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion; thus with the guarantee that they may assemble and unite freely, and express and publicize their opinions freely. When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today, newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere (Habermas, p. 398, 1989).

Newspapers, then, should be concerned less with reflecting solely the political and economic interest of those in power. They are, and should be regarded as a medium of the people, a forum of ideas, not a rhetoric through which to scold their readers. "[In the second half of the eighteenth century, t]he press remained an institution of the public itself, operating to provide and intensify public discussion, no longer a mere organ for the conveyance of information, but not yet a medium of consumer culture" (Habermas, p. 402, 1989).

But a consumer culture has dominated the recent decades of business, entertainment, even politics. It does not necessarily bode well for the future of newspapers, as Miller describes.

Unless the [*Toronto*] *Star* improved its content and its relationship to its readers, the [1993 editorial improvment] committee warned "We are in danger of becoming

like the medieval church, losing the power to awe the ignorant with our magnificent architecture.” Despite the explicit warning against the folly of a purely cosmetic redesign, the *Star* did just that...Canada’s largest daily plunged nearly \$30 million into the red by the end of 1993, advertising lineage declined by 12 per cent and newsroom morale deteriorated (Miller, p. 22, 1997).

Is it possible to return the press to the public, to the vision Habermas had of the media as an establishment of itself and for its public? Accountability is the answer, one to which newspapers—and all print media—must seriously look. American journalist Victor Navasky quotes Habermas: “‘A world without print—imagine it...The level of articulation and analysis would be left to drown. Print is a necessary source for maintaining the public sphere’” (Navasky, p. 121, 1995).

And the idea of the public sphere values communication among individuals, a notion in which meaningful dialogue would harness philosophies to turn into practical societal tools. It’s an example of democratic participation realized in a space allotted to deliberation. The public sphere provides a chance to share.

In theory, a glance outward to the public may sound beneficial, but as G. Stuart Adam points out, journalism rarely looks past its own function. “...I believe that much of journalism teaching—whether it is concerned with professional practices or with social and political effects—is too functional and too divorced from the higher reaches of authorship and thought. Professional practitioners are inclined to define journalism in terms of limited newsroom conceptions and thus jettison any consideration of journalism’s poetics or its ambitious forms” (Adam, p. 7, 1993).

But practicality in the press, as opposed to rigorous self-examination, has its roots deep in history. Yet for all its focus on business, technology and profit, each era

of journalism communication fundamentally influenced the society that followed. The media's own power to affect philosophies and ideals is a potentially dangerous power if not recognized and accounted for, as a system of licensing could accomplish.

The printing press, back when it was a new form of technology, revolutionized Western European society. Gutenberg hadn't simply invented a new piece of equipment. He inadvertently authored the future. News, before the commercial printing press, was communicated by word of mouth among the public--the commoners and peasants. With a strict control on literacy, the state and church had no need to worry about subversive information (Manguel, p. 71, 1996). Oral communication was slow and could easily be stopped, once discovered. Literature could be destroyed, burned, and what wasn't could have little harmful effects since most people were unable to read. But, with mass produced material readily available, literacy rates surged, and so did the threat to the current political system (Manguel, p. 116, 1996). Information, therefore, can be harmful to the ruling class, be it a monarchy, dictator or democracy. To this day, there are spin doctors, press agents and public relations staff who attempt to control, or at least contain information of concern to their organization. It places additional pressure on the readers to beware of information they see in the press.

In Canada by the late 1990s, the attempt to manipulate the news during elections had become routine. Consider this account of the Canadian general election of 1988: "The strategy usually employed by leaders and parties who feel themselves to be in the lead is straightforward: Keep the writing press as far away as possible from the leader. If he makes himself available to the journalists in a formal news conference or an informal "scrum", there is little or no chance that he will receive favourable notices because reporters tend not to be fans.

But there is a real danger that he will say something wrong or foolish on which the press will jump with enthusiasm” (Bird, p. 83, 1997).

Readers must therefore be conscious of not only how journalists do their jobs, but how they must deal with other special interest groups managing the media for their own benefit.

The importance of an historical discussion in this paper is to provide the context in which the media finds itself. Newspapers in the New World, did not set up shop on a mere whim. There were political and economic, as well as cultural reasons and consequences to each period in journalism. There was then, as there are now, and as there will continue to be, an agenda about the media by the public and the practitioners alike. The study of media cannot be divorced from history. On the contrary, communication theory can explain much about the way journalism evolved in North America.

To borrow James Carey’s useful distinction, we operate with two models of what communication is and how it works. The first is the transmission model which takes communication to be the transportation of ideas or information from a sender to a receiver. ...Alternatively, there is a ritual model that takes communication to be a social function of building solidarity and reaffirming common values within a community. Communication constitutes a community rather than a message (Schudson, p. 40, 1995).

As an example, Schudson describes Benjamin Franklin using his newspaper to promote charities, and larger, social change. “[Franklin] did not trust the newspaper to do everything but only to sow the seeds of support in the public. Media are a central institution—one might even claim *the* central institution—in the cultural

construction of American nationhood and cityhoods, and communityhoods across the land” (Schudson, p. 42, 1995).

Taking another chapter out of the journalism history book, the penny press in the United States was another defining moment, one that demonstrates the powerful influence the media had in shaping society. Objectivity, as an ideology of the detachment of the observer from the detached, at that time in the early 1800’s was an unknown concept (Hackett et al., p. 82, 1998). Most newspapers of the time were partisan. Picking up a conservative paper, the reader would have the world revealed under such an ideological banner. If a reader chose a liberal newspaper, then he or she saw only the liberal philosophy. But, during the 1830’s there was a revolution of sorts. American newspapers, specifically New York newspapers, turned away from the emphasis on the reader as client. Instead, advertisers became the main focus. The price dropped from five or six cents to a penny. The *New York Sun* was the first to drop its price in 1833, beginning a vicious newspaper war.

The penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulations and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting to subscription fees and subsidies from political parties. This rationalized the economic structure of newspaper publishing. Sources of income that depended on social ties or political fellow feelings were replaced by market-based income from advertising and sales” (Schudson, p. 18, 1978).

The readers, therefore, became the product that the newspapers then sold to advertisers. It is still the system in place today. But it is not foolproof. Newspapers must now answer to both advertisers and readers, as the *Kingston Whig-Standard* learned the hard way before it was sold in 1990 to the Southam Corporation. “[R]eal

estate agencies in Kingston, Ontario boycotted that city's venerable and prize-winning daily...because of an article--more particularly the placement of it on the front of the Homes section--that they didn't like...; the paper lost \$225,000 in ad sales between May 19 and Labour Day.' Though the paper never backed down....a small paper doesn't lose that much advertising revenue without hurting" (Bird, p. 90, 1997).

Another change also took place as a result of the paper revolution of the 1800s. Publishers were now looking for more readers to sell to advertisers, so, as a way to increase their circulation, they declared themselves politically neutral. With content that would, theoretically, offend no one, the paper would have a bigger draw. Objectivity was born.

Objectivity, then, is a result of economic and business arguments rather than strictly ideological. But it soon turned philosophical, as more journalists were taught to report the "straight" facts, without editorial comment. Neutral language was used and the idea soon blossomed that objectivity was the journalistic ideal (Hackett et al., p. 31, 1998).

Yet another notion about journalism has survived for more than a century intact, with all the rhetoric and ideology that accompanies such longevity: the inverted pyramid story. It is the style of writing considered "hard news". The answers to the questions "who, what, when, where, why, how" are all included in the first few paragraphs. Filler detail can be found further down in the story. It is considered the definitive model of news, with feature reports, or "soft" news usually relegated to the

second cousin status of respectability. The beginning of the inverted pyramid, however, had very little to do with principles, and almost everything to do with technology. When the telegraph was first introduced for commercial use in the 1800's, newspapers jumped at the chance to take advantage of it. Now it was possible to get news from further afield in much less time. The emphasis, was, as usual, to scoop the competition. Yet, at the start, telegraph technology was not reliable. Editors, therefore, devised a standard by which their reporters in the field would have to include the most pertinent information at the top of the story in the event that wires cut out during transmission. Long after the telegraph was regulated to museum status, however, editors continue to promote the inverted pyramid story for similar reasons. In the days when newspapers were assembled by cut and paste, an editor could simply chop the last paragraph or two if a story was too long, or there was not enough room during layout. The story would still have been able to stand on its own.

The style persists to this day, yet with computer technology and digital manipulation, layout and length are not necessarily a concern to the editors. Is there a better or more interesting way to tell a story? It's a question journalists continue to debate.

If so many of the ideals journalists, and, by extension their readers hold true were a result of economics, politics or technology, as opposed to strict ideology, how much of what happens in today's newsrooms will affect the future society? Is this not a reason to make more explicit the process by which news is gathered and disseminated? Would not an industry-wide standard and system of accountability

make the producer and consumer alike more aware of the potential consequences of their actions? At the very least, there would be a record, a written testament to the morals and values of today for the next generation of journalists and readers to examine.

The public, of course, has spoken out before leaving behind written records in the form of the Davey report and the Kent Commission.

As Canada's 1980-81 Royal Commission on Newspapers put it "The great majority [of Canadians] believe that newspapers, and the mass media in general, have responsibilities different from those of other businesses." In other words, Canadians widely believe that news media should seek more than their own profitability in the economic marketplace. Accordingly, as institutions central to democratic life, they are widely expected to function in the public interest (Hackett et al., p. 1, 1998).

The Kent Commission, as it was known, sprung from a public swell of concern over flourishing concentration of ownership in the late seventies and early eighties. The triggering event was what is now infamously referred to as "Black Tuesday" when Southam and Thomson each closed their paper in Ottawa and Winnipeg at the same time, leaving a monopoly newspaper in each city (Hackett et al., p. 63, 1998). The move in 1980 spelled the end of the *Ottawa Journal* and the *Winnipeg Tribune*. Tom Kent, the chair of the commission, was alarmed at the media concentration which saw corporate ownership measured at 77 per cent.

His final report recommended legislation to limit media ownership, but it was never implemented. Media outrage at the possibility of government interference was fierce (Miller, p. 64, 1998). While the spark of public inflammation was bright and strong at first, the press soon convinced its readers by tugging at the notion of

objectivity that it in fact, could be both a private, entrepreneurial institution as well as a public, democratic influence. Personal biases aside, the media said, they justified their oligopoly through neutral reporting. The Kent Commission had been unconvinced of the media's ability to effectively carry out their private and public duties, as John Miller explains: "The press, which assumes a license to criticize every other institution, is the least open of any to criticism of its own performance. It controls the principal channel through which criticism can be expressed and heard. It is singularly reluctant to not only accept criticism and acknowledge error, but even to justify its own conduct when it believes itself in the right" (Miller, p. 37, 1998)

No action was taken by the government at that time, leaving the door open for increased corporate concentration. In fact, the number was up to 93 per cent by 1998 (Miller, p. 61, 1998).

The media had sparred with the federal government before, during the 1970 special Senate Committee on the mass media, chaired by Senator Keith Davey, who lamented the loss of independent owners. The report recommended

that Canada's newspapers needed to set up a national council with public members and wide-ranging functions to not only receive complaints from the public but to initiate its own investigation of questionable conduct; to draft a set of journalistic standards; to promote the need for training, research and development in an industry where that was notoriously absent; and to be an advocate of open government and freedom of information (Miller, p. 43, 1998).

The press, as it would do 10 years later with the Kent Commission, vehemently opposed any government intervention, so it conceded to set up press councils as a way to head off potential legislation. The Ontario Press Council was formed as a

result in 1972, with Quebec and Alberta soon following suit. But the momentum quickly began to lag, so it wasn't until after the Kent report that press councils were established in all other Canadian provinces except Saskatchewan.

The newspapers might have had good intentions, but Miller argues in *Yesterday's News* that the network in place today is a pale shadow of what was envisioned.

“Most councils do not undertake their own investigations, most deal with complaints on a case-by-case basis instead of drafting a comprehensive code of conduct for the press and publicizing it; none play a role in training or development (Miller, p. 44, 1998)

Accountability is the weak link in the present-day press councils. They are not mandated to enforce their decisions, hence rendering their services somewhat null and void. While there is most certainly a place for the type of work they do, and, as such, a licensing system should expand on their mission to explore press complaints, this thesis will delve more deeply into the role of press councils in Chapter Six: Why the Current Safeguards Don't Work.

The press, in its defence, however, is not completely blind to the needs of the public it serves. While newspapers must run as private profit enterprises, they do express genuine interest in discovering how to best cover their communities. Public journalism is an example of their efforts. Sometimes called civic, or advocacy journalism, the increasingly popular style of reporting and writing emphasizes the readers. It is meant to include the public in the way in which their communities are reflected back to them in print. Newspapers, taking on a leadership role, press issues

of social or political concern out into the public sphere, and encourage debate by hosting town hall meetings, facilitating focus groups, and soliciting a variety of opinions from experts and laypeople alike (Power, p. 86-91, 1998). The idea is to create a dialogue with readers about what they feel are important concerns in their town: prostitution, health care, local politics, youth crime, child poverty, traffic. The final product, one that is weeks, perhaps months in the making, becomes in-depth reports, examining all angles in greater detail than a traditional news story strung together in one afternoon. The research can be long and arduous, which means journalists are pulled off their regular duties for weeks at a time. As a result, the projects are often costly and time-consuming.

Not every story or issue lends itself to public journalism, of course. There is still a need for hard news stories, features, interviews and profiles, but the advent of public journalism begins to validate the newspaper's inherent role and influence they have on the community. The philosophy to make readers aware of the standards used by the media, as well as to hold the press accountable for its actions, is therefore reflected in the current civic journalism trend to integrate the public into the news-gathering process itself. Readers no longer remain mere consumers. They are news-makers and collectors at the same time, relying as much on the information provided to them by the media as the information they provide to the press. Public journalism is a small step toward full recognition of the symbiotic relationship readers and journalists share. The drive is toward accountability to the reader by including them in the news process.

A licensing system, while not focusing on one style of journalism, follows a similar path. It is simply a more formalized method through which readers can better understand the news coverage they receive and what they, as citizens in a democracy, can do with it. If the public is finally acknowledged as being an integral component of news gathering, then its members deserve to know the standards by which journalists work.

There are, of course, critics of public journalism.

To some of its opponents, public journalism lacks objectivity, relies too heavily on opinion polls, and simply takes too long to produce. Others, like John Douglas, managing editor of the *Winnipeg Free Press* see the approach as nothing more than “a cliché that’s caught on in the United States.” Or, as Bill Turpin of *The Daily News* in Halifax puts it, “an expensive trend.” Perhaps, but it’s not a trend that’s wide-spread—at least not yet. In Canada, although the majority, if not all, of newspapers tackle social policy and community issues, few papers have embraced public journalism (Power, p. 88, 1998).

While the style has not spread across many Canadian newspapers, and as such, there are few Canadian cases, an example from the United States illustrates its potential.

The *Witicha Eagle* in Kansas was one of the first papers to document its experiment with public journalism. The journalists took what started out as lead-up coverage for their 1990 election and turned it over to the public sphere. The newspaper polled citizens to find out what election issues were important to them, and identified 10 topics of concern, such as education and the environment. The staff then prepared in-depth reports about where the candidates stood on each of these issues. Along with other media outlets in town, the newspaper also actively

encouraged voter registration and turnout. “The project, *Eagle* editor Buzz Merritt later said, ‘caused people to move outside of themselves a little more, to view things as problems the community can approach rather than something politicians and institutions are going to fix’” (Power, p. 88, 1998). The editor goes on to explain how the experiment made him consider that there is possibly a “better way of newspapering, a different tone and attitude that can be applied to everyday journalism” (Power, p. 88, 1998). The paper went on to do more public journalism with its People Project, an initiative to get community members to respond to problems such as crime and family stress.

Other newspapers, both in the U.S. and Canada soon followed suit. As Nicole Power describes examples of public journalism in her 1998 article, “Powered by the People” published in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, The *Toronto Star* examined spousal abuse in an eight-part series in 1995, and repeated their efforts in 1997 with a hard look at child abuse. Both the *Kingston Whig-Standard* and the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* have also attempted various forms of public journalism. In each case, the underlying principle for choosing that particular style was to promote awareness and encourage solutions on the part of the public (Power, p. 88, 1998).

It takes leadership and vision, though, for a newspaper to break from the status quo into something that delves deeply into the heart and soul of a community and its readers. The same vision is needed to address the notion that, as leaders of democratic influence, newspapers should open themselves up much more to their readers in the public sphere.

Chapter Three:

Media's Loss of Credibility: The Need for Trust and Responsibility

A discussion about the accountability and ethics of journalism is appropriate at any time, considering the public trust experienced by the media, but now, in the late 1990s, a closer look at the industry, both in Canada and the U.S., reveal disturbing trends. Not only is media credibility eroding, but many cases of unethical journalism practices are coming to light. Is this an indication of shoddier workmanship, or simply more awareness on the part of the press to report the ethical crimes committed by its own? Either way, the examples of journalists getting caught in unethical situations is a valid wake-up call to re-examine the standards already in place for the media.

He was for a brief time, the toast of journalism. Only 25, Stephen Glass was an associate editor of the *New Republic*, a prolific contributor to its pages and a sought-after freelance to the *Rolling Stone*, *Harpers*, *George* and other prestigious publications. Lively and vigorous, his writing demonstrated a sharp eye for detail, a sensitive ear for language and an impeccable grasp of the telling anecdote.

Unfortunately, Stephen Glass was also an unmitigated, bald-face liar.

Of the 41 articles he wrote for the *TNR*, 27 were invented in whole, or in part, their contents based on nothing more than his fertile imagination. His work for other organs was equally suspect.

On its own, perhaps the Glass affair might have come to be regarded as a regrettable anomaly—an ugly but temporary rip in the otherwise well-made fabric of North American journalism.

Instead, in what has been a long and difficult season for the mass media, Glass is seen as the most egregious example of a profession that, for many observers, is increasingly out of control. Shoddy ethics, rampant sensationalism entertainment masquerading as news, unfounded rumour disseminated as fact, unsourced stories, brazen invasion of privacy—it's the paparazzification of

journalism (Posner, p. C1, 1998).

There are other examples. Columnists Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle of the *Boston Globe* both resigned amid controversy. Smith admitted to making up characters, and Barnicle, already under suspension for plagiarism was questioned about a column he wrote regarding two children with cancer.

A *Cincinnati Enquirer* reporter, Michael Gallagher, was fired after stealing voice-mail messages from a company he was investigating.

Broadcast news has also not been immune. While the focus of this paper is not T.V. or radio, the recent strife within CNN over a retracted story can stand as a lesson about solid research to all journalists. The cable news network was forced to admit there were no grounds to a story claiming the United States used a deadly nerve gas during the Vietnam War.

Canadian examples of outright violation of journalism conduct are less prevalent, yet this by no means excuses Canadian journalists from keeping a vigilant eye on those who knowingly mislead the public. One illustration from British Columbia in 1990, shows that conflict of interest, leading to unethical news stories, can just as likely happen here. The issue, dating back almost a decade is also a sad example that these controversies are not a new phenomenon.

The case involved the then Attorney General of British Columbia, Bud Smith, who was at the time involved in an investigation into a political lobby scandal. On the first day of the proceedings, Smith chatted over a cell phone with an assistant about the political ins-and-outs of the case, as well as disparaging gossip about the lawyers.

Unbeknownst to them, their conversation was being freely recorded over the open airwaves by freelance journalist Brian Graves. He later recorded many of Smith's conversations with TV reporter Margot Sinclair, which proved a very close relationship between the politician and journalist. Once the opposition got a hold of this information, the scandal burst out into the open.

Reporters were drawn into the uncomfortable position of covering themselves. The story of possible political interference included the secondary angle of Smith's dealings with Sinclair. And those dealings led to a third aspect--their relationship. Most news outfits skated over the personal angle. Others felt tiptoeing around the angle meant giving special treatment to a member of the media. So they bent over backwards in pursuing the media angle of the story to the point where others were complaining the primary angle was getting short shrift (Leyne, p. 18, 1990).

The ethical dilemmas multiply when a member of the media is implicated in wrongful behaviour, because as the B.C. journalists discovered in 1990, how is it possible to get the right balance of angles? Should the focus be on the journalist in question? The context? The larger ethical issues? It would be easy for reporters to lose sight of their readers, the public to whom they're responsible.

A system of licensing may not erase, nor even ease the burden on the journalists in cases like this, but a set of standards will give the reader, first of all, a better understanding of the unethical behaviour, and secondly, a firmer grasp on how to expect the media to report on such controversies. With greed, ambition and human nature being what it is, instances of poor judgment and false writing will inevitably continue. It doesn't even take an unethical situation for a newspaper to see its credibility erode. Even practices that were once shunned, but now more popularly

used, such as quoting anonymous sources, can cause credibility problems. “This use of anonymity undermines the connection between news and reality and further corrodes the integrity of news in the mind of the viewer, or reader or listener. Today the unattributed or unsourceable quote, the source who speaks on condition that he or she not be identified, or some variation on that phrase is so commonplace as to be banal” (Bird, p. 99, 1997). In fact, Bird illustrated this point by searching through the *The Globe and Mail’s* database of past issues. He discovered that in November, 1980, the term anonymity did not appear (in the context discussed here), but in November, 1989, it showed up 11 times, almost one every other day of publication (Bird, p. 101, 1997).

If a standard were in place across the media industry, (suggesting as one ethical principle that no anonymous sources be used, for example), it would not only give journalists a firmer leg to stand on when accusing a fellow reporter, but also provide readers with a sense of trust that the standards they expect of their media are being recognized and upheld.

Right now the media does not have the luxury of singling out individuals straying from the press’s professional conduct without a public backlash against the media as whole. Considering the mood of the public today, one story of shoddy ethics tars the whole industry with the same brush, as Posner pointed out in his article about Stephen Glass. The numbers tell a chilling tale.

Princeton Research Associates found in July, 1998 that media credibility is at an all-time low. Compared to 1985, Americans who believe “all or most” of what they

read of a local newspaper content is down from 28 per cent to 21 per cent. Only one in three Americans believe journalists have a desire to report fairly and accurately, while 35 per cent say journalists are less inclined to report fairly.

Those numbers are lower than an earlier survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which found only 29 per cent of the public rated daily newspapers as highly credible (*Editor and Publisher*, p. 8, 32, 1998).

“The news media have themselves to blame, according to James Gentry, dean of the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Kansas...In an interview [*Oregonian* editor Sandra Mims] Rowe said the public has a right to hold the media organization accountable for ethical lapses, but ‘what’s troubling is if underneath that they just don’t trust us. Rowe fears credibility problems are rooted in doubts about the character of the newspapers, what they choose to cover and how...” (*Editor and Publisher*, p. 32, 1998).

Another study, conducted by the Times Mirror Co.’s Pew Center for Civic Journalism in the fall of 1998 concludes “The news media has a generally positive view of itself in the watchdog role...but the outside world strongly faults the news media for its negativism,” and believes that “the press gets in the way of society solving its problems” (Posner, p. C1, 1998).

In Canada, John Miller, journalism professor at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto says that Canadians want more from their newspapers.

“In a 1994 poll conducted in eight countries and co-ordinated by the U.S. media giant Times Mirror Co....[s]ix in ten Canadians believed that news organizations are often influenced by the powerful, therefore are not independent. A similar number said that newspapers tend to favour one side over another in their stories, and half said that they invade people’s privacy. One in every three Canadians felt that newspapers can’t be relied upon to get the facts straight. This indicates that people value the role of newspapers play in our society, but that they are increasingly holding them up to

higher standards and are somewhat dissatisfied with how they measure up (Miller, p. 12, 1998).

Miller also describes a disturbing trend in Gallup polls from 1982 onward that have asked Canadians to rate the respect and honesty of certain professions. While journalists have always come in far behind the most highly rated jobs such as doctors, pharmacists, police and engineers, the 1997 poll shows journalists were tied with business executives, whose ethical ranking was slightly above zero (Miller, p. 38, 1998).

The message should be getting through to the media, and newspapers specifically, that their public, the readers they depend on to bring in advertisers don't trust them. Without a call to arms, by staying the course with the status quo, the newspapers risk losing their businesses.

A system of licensing, is one method through which to regain the public's trust. Perception is such a large factor in the current media malaise, so even the idea that journalists take their readers' concerns seriously could go a long way in recapturing some credibility. The fact that newspapers, and the media are taking action might be enough to stave off further erosion of circulation and trust.

Perception, though is a difficult beast. Powerful as it is, it can often be misleading. Show must be followed by substance; hence, journalists must follow through with implementation and accountability of standards if they are proposed.

But of greater concern than even a perceived solution to credibility issues is the fact that, contrary to what all the polls indicate, the majority of journalists are not

unethical, nor do they intend to break the code of conduct already in place in their organizations. As Carleton University Professor Roger Bird says, “Most reporters think of themselves as ethical, and most of the time they are. Most ethical concerns have to do with the marketplace or legal issues. [Journalists] walk into libel. No one wants it and they usually don’t worry about it. I don’t think licensing journalists would make those [honest] mistakes any less frequent. We’ll still goof up and still be ethical.” (Bird, personal interview, 1999).

Journalists make mistakes. It will happen time and again. But the idea to license journalists, as one way to increase the credibility and trust among the public is not intended as a punishment. It is intended to redress the gap between perception of the public and the perception of the media. Many news organizations have a code of ethics, or guidelines to help their staff sort through tough ethical decisions. There are rules about conflict of interest, comity involvement, financial interests, respect, privacy, fairness, accuracy, community standards and even accountability and public service.

More and more media outlets are drawing up codes of ethics. The Associated Press Managing Editors’ Association surveyed its members in 1974 and found only nine per cent had written codes. A 1992 survey done by the Society of Professional Journalists found 44 per cent of editors had written codes (Fink, p. 119, 1995). In Canada, the *Ottawa Citizen*, the *Toronto Star*, and the CBC are among news organizations with written codes. Even journalism schools such as Carleton University have adopted guidelines for their students. At the moment, however, no

specific appraisal or current research into the effectiveness of these codes has been done.

But what about the ethical dilemmas that fall into a gray area? For example should an editor run a photo of a drowned boy in a body bag not yet zipped up that includes his family tormented with guilt and grief? On the one hand, the photo, startling as it is, could prevent other drownings by underlying the implications of unsafe water practices, on the other, there's a sense of decency and good taste that must be adhered to.

There are too many situations requiring judgment calls to have every conceivable scenario written into a code that would be standard for licensed journalists. The license, therefore, is not meant to tie a reporter's hands, but to make him or her aware of the professional conduct expected as a result of the judgment call.

A license may be an imperfect system, but it would go a long way in bringing the expectations of readers and reporters in line. As it stands now, journalists have a different agenda than the public.

When ordinary citizens have a chance to pose questions to political leaders, they rarely ask about the game of politics. They want to know how the reality of politics will affect them—through taxes, programs, scholarship funds, wars. Journalists justify their intrusiveness and excesses by claiming that they are the public's representatives, asking questions their fellow citizens would ask if they had the privilege of meeting with Presidents and senators. In fact, they ask questions that only their fellow political professionals care about (Fallows, p. 50, 1996).

An ombudsman's survey illustrates this point quite vividly. Henry McNulty, of the *Hartford Courant* asked readers to respond to real-life ethical situations with

which the *Courant*'s own staff had previously dealt. The mandate was to learn if the public shares the same ethical standards and decision-making processes as the journalists. McNulty discovered that readers, in general, were more cautious than editors, that their responses were more varied, that readers place a high value on personal privacy, that they are more concerned with issues of taste than editors, and that readers are not convinced that relatives of famous people are considered newsworthy based solely on that relationship (McNulty, p. 32, 1994).

The concept of licensing, then, is to align how readers and reporters think so both the public and the journalists understand what is expected of each other. "Public perceptions have been found to be important components of media credibility, which in turn, plays a pivotal role not only in media's audience retention, but also in public support for freedom of the press" (Voakes, p. 24, 1997).

Support and trust go hand in hand, and it is the trust in the relationship between journalists and the readers that gets severely tested when the media attempt to balance its dual role as a powerful institution and public watchdog. Can the public trust that a large institution, will effectively watch over the society into which they are so intricately connected and woven? How do newspapers reconcile this dichotomy? Have the media been relying too much on the implicit trust of the public that they will keep each entity separate? Is it fair to the readers to expect such a leap of faith on their part? Should the newspapers not spell out more clearly how they keep themselves, as an institution of society, out of the news stories? Or is that even possible?

This is doubtful, considering the newspaper depends on both pieces of its identity to succeed. It needs the watchdog function to bring in the public—otherwise for whom are they vigilant? Yet it needs its position as a powerhouse to convince advertisers of its influence on the readers. When newspapers speak of the bottom line, they mean money, of course, but they need to consider the value of the public trust. Without it, they would be ineffective in their mission to guard over abuses in other societal institutions. Should the papers wear that trust too thin, as the polls indicate is a real threat, their institutional power becomes jeopardized at the same time. With enough canceled subscriptions, and dropped advertisers the erosion of the media would be complete.

The responsibility, and the best interest of newspapers, lie with maintaining the public trust. In the relationship between consumer and producer the trust becomes implicit if each party knows what to expect of the other. A system of licensing is a way to clarify those expectations, which leads to a long-term trust, that, in turn, helps the financial stability of a newspaper as readers continue to buy, which then cements the newspaper's position as societal influencer, making itself that much more attractive to advertisers. The circle closes, finally, with a higher level of media credibility the public can trust.

In order to earn that trust, journalists must understand what the readers want. Yet from the recent spate of media sensationalism, it is doubtful that news organizations are listening. Take, for example, the 1998 U.S. presidential scandal. When allegations erupted that U.S. President Bill Clinton had had a sexual affair with former White

House intern Monica Lewinsky and lied about it under oath, the media, both in the U.S. and Canada flew into a frenzy. But only weeks into the story, many polls were claiming that the American public had heard enough about Clinton's extra-marital affair. The media circus continued, however, saturating the market with unsubstantiated reports, unnamed sources, rumour and hearsay. One magazine article was published the first week of February, 1998, only two weeks after it came to light that Clinton allegedly lied about his affair with Lewinsky as he testified in defence of the sexual harassment charges laid against him by Paula Jones. The story, based on a Pew Research Center survey says:

Sympathy for a president beleaguered by a press perceived as biased and inaccurate is an important element in Clinton's support....Americans are highly critical of the media's fact-checking, its objectivity and the amount of punditry associated with the story. While the public is interested in the story, it clearly believes that the media has gone overboard in its coverage. More than half (55 per cent) fault the media for the quantity of coverage the story has received, and eight-in-10 say there has been too much discussion by commentators and analysis (*Quill*, p. 26, 1998).

One example of excessive information is the amount of newsprint and airtime devoted to the cigar, which was supposedly used as a sexual aid. Most readers have a knowledge of the cigar, but to what end? If the media is to tell the public what it needs to know, where is the "need-to-know" basis in the information about the cigar? Is there not an argument that the media should be concentrating on more serious issues, such as the (then) brewing conflict in Kosovo, now ignited into an armed battle, or domestic matters like the growth hormones in cattle that may actually affect Canadians' health?

These comments are not meant to diminish the importance of the Clinton story. There were valid news items, considering it was the first time a sitting president had been subpoenaed before a Grand Jury, and only the second time in the history of the United States that a president had been impeached by Congress. Yet, even as the trial in the Senate limped to a strong acquittal, coming nowhere near the two-thirds majority they needed to convict, politicians from all parties were questioning the value of the whole episode. The majority of the American public, however, had been asking those very questions for more than a year, but the media had not heeded them.

Some journalists did take issue. A new organization was formed called The Committee of Concerned Journalists dedicated to strengthening the basic principles of responsible journalism. A study of newspaper and broadcast coverage of the Clinton affair “found that 40 per cent of the stories relied on a single source, more than half the coverage was based on passing along details, not on first hand reporting” (Geimann, p. 24, 1998).

American journalism has a reputation of being much more tabloid-oriented than in Canada, so can Canadian journalists escape the tarnish heaped on their American counterparts? Not quite.

Canadian reportage throughout the [Clinton-Lewinsky] story was more subdued in both volume and graphic detail. Even so, an Angus-Reid poll found that two-thirds of people it surveyed accused the media of sensationalism and one-third said they had boycotted certain media because of the way stories such as the Clinton White House sex scandal and the death of Princess Diana were reported (Nash, p. 24, 1998).

The concern about the Clinton coverage in Canada lies, yet again, in the media's response to questions about their content: the public needs to know. But how much did Canadians need to know about the issue? How did the events affect Canadian lives?

It is typical of the media to respond to public criticism about content by saying they give the public what it wants. And there lies an even greater debate in journalism, one which a licensing system addresses directly.

Entertainment values, the critics lament, are seeping into the news media, blurring the lines between what was once the sole domain of current events and the splashy colour traditionally viewed as fluff. To note, the Clinton scandal first broke over the Internet, a barely recognized news media source up until now, by Matt Drudge, a web reporter with a reputation for digging up sleaze. But very quickly the "dished dirt" jumped from cyberspace, known for its dubious credibility of verifiable information, to well-respected mainstream media such as CNN, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. It wasn't long before the sizzling details hit the Canadian press. The all-news channels now had riveting TV, but still had to keep viewers from one hour to the next. In a milli-second world without borders and instantaneous transmission, the lead time for reports to go to air has shrunk remarkably. While this is not the case for print journalism, which inherently gains much more lag time, newspapers must still compete for the public's attention. Larger, bolder headlines, bright, shocking photos all have their roots in entertainment's lessons of grabbing the

readers' attention. Newspapers are fighting for a marketshare already saturated with detail and speculation. Entertainment in the media is not a force to dismiss lightly.

...[T]he glory and limitation of journalism is it's supposed to be about life itself, and life is usually banal, even those special moments of it that someone decides are news. Journalism is supposed to deal in facts. Boring, flat, ugly, often unhelpful, confusing facts. Citizens are supposed to create their own truth once they have enough news. But the power of entertainment is forcing journalists to fight on the enemy's territory. [There's a] constant temptation to cross the line from fact to fiction, to entertain as well as inform, to create reality instead of report it (Bird, p. 133, 1997).

While on the surface the use of entertainment may seem valuable—after all, newspapers are in the business of bringing audiences to advertisers, and what better way to draw people in than through entertainment—the danger lies in the temptation to trivialize, and make less important the actual news. Knowlton Nash, former CBC news anchor calls it the dumbing down of news (Nash, p. 25, 1998).

But the critics' lament of news evolving into entertainment must be tempered with a closer look at journalism history. Too many readers and practitioners alike call up, with rose-coloured lenses, the glory days of journalism past. Fierce competition and ethical debates have swirled around the media for hundreds of years. Yellow journalism at the turn of the century is a prime example. Newspaper wars were so profound that muck-raking was taken to new depths. Anything goes to get the scoop, to inch ahead of the competition. Legend has it that William Randolph Hearst, new owner and editor of the *New York Journal* in 1898 incited the Spanish-American conflict by suggesting to his correspondent in Cuba to stay on. "Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war" (Schudson, p. 62, 1978). The news of

Cuban women being searched on their ship by Spanish officers a few months later boosted Hearst's circulation. But it was soon revealed by his competition, Joseph Pulitzer at the *New York World* that the stories were, in fact, false.

Peter Johansen, a journalism professor at Carleton University, says problems such as sensationalism are circular. "Very little in the history of the media is invented, but merely reinvented. All the ills today have been there since the media began. At various points, the public, or even journalists get fed up and there's tempering of the practice. But then it begins again" (Johansen, personal interview, 1999).

How then, with the recurring circle of sensationalism in the media, can a licensing system be of any value? By outlining in bold the boundaries between news and entertainment in the form of standards. Entertainment is blurring the worth of news, as Roger Bird describes.

During the Conservative Party convention in Ottawa during the summer of 1993, YTV included morphing in its coverage. It included computer-generated transformations of the two leading candidates, making Jean Charest look like rock musician Jon Bon Jovi and the soon-to-be prime minister, Kim Campbell, look like the well-known singer and actress Cher.... There was no attempt at all to deceive the audience. But the implications are disturbing... (Bird, p. 117, 1997)

Setting up a method by which the standards of news could be guaranteed would attempt to counteract such erosion. Clearly stated guidelines and professional conduct that licensed journalists would be expected to follow would finally give the readers a context in which to evaluate the value of their news on its own merit.

The recent debate over the ethics and entertainment of news has a few journalists glancing inward. Articles in the *Columbia Journalism Review* invite readers to investigate some of these concerns. “The Erosion of Values: A Debate Among Journalists Over How to Cope” (p. 44-47, 1998); “Money Lust: How Pressure for Profit is Perverting Journalism” (Hickey, 28-36, 1998); “Assembly-Line Journalism” (Underwood, p. 42-44, 1998); “The Squeeze: Some Major Advertisers Step Up the Pressure on Magazines to Alter their Content: Will Editors Bend?” (Baker, p. 30-36, 1998) all demonstrate that serious thought is being directed toward the topics of concern in media ethics today.

It is somewhat comforting to readers to realize that journalists are as affected about issues of accountability and trust. To hear reporters cry for greater, more careful gatekeeping that withstands competitive and financial pressures, to learn that the media are becoming self-reflexive could go a long way in recapturing public respect. Unfortunately, these voices, while real, are not mainstream. *Columbia Journalism Review* is an industry publication, a self-appointed media critic. The publication, intended as a check on the system, is a good start, but the message must be louder for the general public to understand that the media is serious about taking action to regain their readers’ trust. Newspapers will go much further in enhancing their credibility if they become candid, honest, and willing to lay bare their biases, background, training, experience and ethical drive, as a licensing system would allow. It is much easier for a reader to access an up-front, open publication to one which,

even though it may possess the same quality of journalism, is difficult, narrow and gruff.

A license will also remind journalists of their qualification as knowledge experts. Confidence in the position of news interpreter reflects back to the reader. As this passage from a novel by Lawrence Hill explains, journalists need to recognize their value to the reader.

“I’m no expert,” Mahatma said. “I don’t really have an opinion on it. I’m just an ordinary person. Just a reporter.”

“Just a reporter? What does that mean?”

“It means my job is to report facts, not to editorialize.”

“Editorialize? I’m asking you to *think*! And don’t tell me you’re not an expert. You are. You are the news expert. You are paid to stay abreast of the news. You attend demonstrations, you watch people get beaten up and you grill police superintendents. Don’t bullshit me about being an ordinary person. If you can’t think for yourself, who the hell can?” (Hill, p. 131, 1992)

While the coverage of big news events such as the Clinton scandal, O.J. Simpson’s murder trial, or Princess Diana’s death affect Canadian media and call into question the same fundamental values of sensationalism and entertainment that the American press must deal with, Canada has its own homegrown lessons to which licensing and accountability can be applied.

The first is the case of Paul Bernardo, an Ontario man accused in the early 1990s of raping and killing two teenage girls. His then-wife, Karla Homolka, was also charged, but pled to a lesser charge in exchange for her testimony against Bernardo (Miller, p. 106-112, 1998). The media scrutiny of the case leading up to Bernardo’s trial was intense, but became even hotter when it was revealed that videotapes of Bernardo and Homolka abusing and murdering the two girls were discovered in the

bathroom ceiling of the couple's home. The families of the victims, horrified that their daughters' pain and agony would be accessible to the media through open court, asked for a publication ban. The press's rights of freedom of expression, especially as representatives of the public, were pitted against the families' rights to privacy. Finally, the judge allowed the videotape in open court with the media present, but with only audio sound available to the spectators. Only the judge, jury and lawyers were permitted to watch the tape (Gray, p. 1, 1996). While there were other complicated issues of publication bans, the videotapes became a signifier of limits. How far should the media go in its quest to keep the public informed? And how sincere are the media in that quest?

Media coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial concentrated on the trial; news reports of the Paul Bernardo trial sensationalized the details of the gruesome sex crimes. Important issues, such as violence against women and the performance of the police, which have broad implications and may lead to critical scrutiny of dominant and often repressive institutions, became at best side topics that attracted far less attention (Hackett et al., p. 142, 1998).

Incidentally, the Supreme Court of Canada recently ruled that it would not hear arguments from the families of the victims to permanently seal the tape. While now under strict court rules, the videotape may be required as evidence in further matters (including the case of an author charged with illegally viewing the tape.) The Supreme Court, by refusing to hear arguments, has tried yet again to balance the possible "need to know" of the public, with rights of private individuals.

As part of the implementation of a licensing system, questions about the length to which the media should go in its bid to inform the public should be addressed. A set

of standards to uphold the dignity of victims in the media could, for example, have prevented the conflict between the press and the victims' families. The issue of describing or showing the content of the videotape would therefore, have been mute.

Another Canadian example, this one is less about laws than circumstance. When the Swiss Air Flight 111 crashed off Peggys Cove, N.S. in September, 1998, droves of journalists descended on the quiet site and the families of the victims. Tragic as the crash was, killing all 229 people on board, the circling journalists left critics, such as Kim Brunhuber, a reporter with the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, disturbed about the invasion into the families' personal grief (Brunhuber, p. C4, 1998). "An interview with a grieving relative is no longer an exclusive, grief shots are a dime a dozen... This is the only profession in which one would ever hear this exchange: 'Did you actually see any body parts?' 'No.' 'Oh. Too Bad.' ... The media are happy enough to look for lines to tell us what is a decent, safe distance and what is too close" (Brunhuber, p. C4, 1998). Roger Bird, the Carleton journalism professor, argues that "There was no unethical content. The issues arose from the nature of the news process. It is the news process we've got to be concerned about" (Bird, personal interview, 1999).

But that news process can lose its focus in the heat of sensational news stories, as Miller illustrates by recounting the death of Georgina (ViVi) Leimonis. She was shot and killed during a botched robbery at a trendy Toronto café in 1994. The suspects were black and said to have come from "The Jungle", a public housing subdivision in North York (Miller, p. 129, 1998).

It might have been a useful time to debate gun control or even the economic

disparities of a city where 75,000 children ate at food banks every month. But that didn't happen. Columnists mourned the city's loss of innocence, especially the *Globe and Mail's* Michael Valpy, who said: "The barbarians are inside the gate" —an unfortunate and inflammatory comment that implied that this was not random act at all but rather an invasion of civilized society by the underclass (Miller, p.130, 1998).

A licensing system, then, is meant as a method by which standards about the process of news can also be confirmed. Regulation must look at the system as a whole, as well as the journalist. But it is the journalists who make up the system, so those who are registered would all be aware of the standards and can therefore better influence that system.

A much more difficult media ethical dilemma is the Terry Milewski controversy. This example is more subtle, much less clear. The areas of ethical certainty are shades of gray, with no clear line in the sand. It is not a clear-cut case of one opinion pitted against its opposite. While Milewski is a TV reporter, as opposed to a print journalist on which this thesis focuses, the issues his case raises are as important to journalism as a whole, regardless of the medium. The timeliness of the controversy makes it relevant to this piece of work.

Milewski, a CBC reporter, was charged with bias by the Prime Minister's office, in connection to stories he worked on relating to the APEC inquiry. The RCMP Public Complaints Commission was examining the possible violation of the Constitutional rights of protesters by RCMP members at the 1997 summit in Vancouver. But Milewski reported in November, 1998, soon after the hearing started, that there were allegations the Prime Minister's office had been involved. Milewski

quickly became part of the story when his e-mails to his sources on the story were submitted as evidence to the Inquiry. One of the messages, sent to Craig Jones, a protester, is quoted as saying “Thanks again for your help on this story. Not much new in tonight’s, I’m afraid—we only just got on the air at all—so we must await Jones vs. the Forces of Darkness in the courts for our next attempt to milk it” (Nolan, p. A11, 1998). His e-mail advice also included strategy advice for Jones and his lawyers based on his own experience covering politics.

Milewski was suspended for three days after the Prime Minister’s officer (PMO) complained about his allegedly biased report and in light of the e-mails. But, contrary to CBC policy, he wrote an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* defending himself and attacking the government, crying censorship. “Who’s next? Which journalist will be the target of a personal attack by the PMO, forcing his or her employer to pull him off a story...? The PMO’s strategy was to make me a subject of controversy by condemning my journalistic method. That attack, if successful, will tie the hands of many other reporters” (Milewski, p. A23, 1998). While the CBC ombudsman eventually cleared Milewski of all bias, the lingering issue and bitter debate still remains. The ombudsman is in place, specifically for complaints from the public about CBC media coverage. The PMO, whether it was a political move or not, claimed there was a problem and took it through the proper channels of accountability. Yet, Milewski cries foul. If the system works in theory, how then could anyone complain about bias in news reporting without being accused of censorship?

This wasn't theory, however. In reality, there were political maneuverings on every participants' part. The CBC, itself an arms-length government organization, ran into the problem of perception when critics inside the CBC suggested that management would come down hard on Milewski as a way to avoid any upset to the broadcaster's government funding (Nolen,p. A11, 1998). "“Milewski is right, but is it worth it if the government reopens the stable-funding issue for the CBC? If 5,000 people lose their jobs? Fine, he's right. But how right does he have to be?” [a senior producer said]” (Nolen, p. A11, 1998).

How was the public affected by this, an issue of obvious importance to the journalism community? Milewski's e-mail revealed to viewers how close a reporter can be to a source. In this case, it was determined that the distance remained professional, but the public was nonetheless made aware of another important aspect of news gathering.

The proposed licensing system could, therefore, in its standards address the issue of sources, so not only would journalists have some guidelines about appropriate behaviour, but the readers, viewers and listeners, (should they be interested), would know where to turn to better understand the relationship between reporters and their sources. It would also be of benefit to members of the public, if they themselves become sources. The journalists, as experts in the industry, have the upper hand in how the news process works. An individual, requested for an interview, or multiple interviews, would be sure that licensed journalists live up to honest, ethical standards in their relationship.

A licensing system, with a regulatory body for accountability, might also have helped in this case. The regulatory body, set up to be fair and neutral, would not, at least, be burdened with the perception that it has ulterior motives to the outcome of a case, as an employer like the CBC had. The idea is simply to have a system in place to resolve conflicts of media ethics, standards and discipline in an open, transparent manner.

Without a formalized system in place, can an industry effectively police itself? “The principle of self-regulation [in journalism] has often come into question and for several reasons. First there is no legal requirement for memberships in professional organizations or for compliance with their codes of behaviour. Second, there are no apparent sanctions for noncompliance” (Romanow et al., p. 228, 1992).

A licensing system, then, where there would be compliance with codes of behaviour and methods of accountability would be an effective manner in which to regain the trust, and confidence of readers, and realign the public's and the media's perception of journalism to match.

Chapter Four

Media Ethics: Morality in Today's Society

Many of the instances in which conflicts arise between journalists and their readers are not nearly as clearly defined in terms of right or wrong as some of the previous examples of unethical reporters such as those who fabricated their stories. More likely, controversy occurs over issues that contradict the moral values of the opponents. A reader might disagree with the way in which a reporter has covered a story, but this by no means indicates the journalist has broken any ethical standard. How to decide who's right? Context is needed to answer the question; context of the situation itself as well as context of the values and ethics by which the two parties live. A frame of reference of values is necessary to evaluate theories, decisions and situations that make sense to the individual.

Coming to a common understanding of that frame of reference is a stumbling block in many disputes, but a look at various ethical philosophies over time might add an appreciation of how differences can occur. The most influential schools of thought can be summarized in five different forms.

The first one is Aristotle's Virtue Ethics, or the Golden Mean. Dating back to the fourth century B.C., this theoretical position situates virtue half way between the extremes of excess and deficiency. It is a middle, away from over- or under-doing.

“Whereas many ethical theories focus on behavior, Aristotle emphasizes character rather than conduct per se. Outer balance, in his view reflects our inner disposition. Generally speaking, in extremely complicated situations, with layers of ambiguity and uncertainty, Aristotle’s principle has the most intelligent appeal (Christians et al., p. 12, 1995). The individual is the centre, rather than the act, which must be selected for its own sake.

“The act itself must spring from a firm and unchanging character” (Patterson et al., p.7, 1994).

German philosopher Immanuel Kant offered up the Categorical Imperative, where what is right for one is right for all. The rules are universal, without exception. Humanity, therefore is always an end, rather than a means. “Kant’s ethical theory is based on the notion that it is the act itself, rather than the person who acts, in which moral forces reside...For Kant, an action was morally justified only if it was performed from duty...strict duties were generally negative: not to murder...not to lie. The meritorious duties were more positive: to aid others, to develop one’s talent” (Patterson et al., p. 8, 9, 1994).

Then came Englishmen John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham in the nineteenth century with the theory of Utilitarianism defined to mean the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The focus is on action. It is “concerned with consequences of an ethical judgment. Rather than looking at the intention behind the act, as Kant suggests, one must explore the best outcome for the greatest number of people” (Day, p. 54, 1997). U.S. Media ethics scholar Clifford G. Christians adds that “these

utilitarians argue that other values besides pure happiness possess intrinsic worth--values such as friendship, knowledge, health and symmetry...rightness or wrongness is to be assessed in terms of total amount of value ultimately produced" (Christians et al., p. 15, 1995).

Rawl's Veil of Ignorance, as the fourth idea, takes a different approach. The theory is based on the idea that justice emerges when the context of social differences is divorced from the equation. For example, the two parties in dispute are to step behind a "veil of ignorance" and step back from real circumstances to eliminate barriers. If there are no environmental, or social factors standing in between two people, then a resolution can be reached. Behind the veil, each person is equal, leaving only the conflict, which can then be focused on without distraction. The theory functions within the philosophy of Egalitarianism, where "individuals should be treated equally in terms of rights and opportunities" (Day, p. 52, 1997).

Finally, there is the concept of Judeo-Christian values, or love thy neighbour as thyself. This biblical notion, on which our Canadian society is based, revolves around the idea of providing an ethical framework to which individual dilemmas can be addressed. People, therefore, live by agape. Unselfish and indiscriminatory love dominates. "...[U]ltimately, humans stand under only one moral command or virtue: to love God and humankind. All other obligations, though connected, are considered derivative" (Christians et al., p. 18, 1995).

But what to do with such diverse philosophies of thinking? As a democratic society governed by the rule of law, the majority of Canada's population is steeped in

its Judeo-Christian heritage. If one ethical theory must dominate, it must be that of the majority. While not dismissing the other lines of thought as insignificant, the beliefs of the majority nevertheless defines the country's frame of ethical reference. This includes the press, as a power institution of society. Journalistic values, then, are incorporated into the framework.

It is important that members of the media understand from which theoretical background their work comes. Not only will greater awareness create tolerance for those readers who do not share the same values, but education in a philosophical grounding of media ethics, or rules set by morals, will also make journalists more conscious of the way they do their job. Such education and awareness would be mandatory as part of the licensing process, either in a formal university setting, or as a separate course or exam required of candidates (as candidates for the professional engineer designation must write a separate ethics exam). As a result, the public can assume, by seeing a registered journalist on a byline, that the reporter has taken responsibility to understand the theoretical and practical ethical issues that permeate through the job.

Ethics, itself an important field of study, must be carefully considered in an industry responsible for dissemination of a society's information.

When the average person contrasts ethics with science, it is ethics that tends to be viewed as changeable, unsystematic, and idiosyncratic. Science has rigor, proof and some relationship to an external reality....In our view ethics as a field has at least as much continuity of thought as developments in science. And while it often cannot be quantified, it has rigor, the systematic quality, and the relationship to reality that moderns too often characterize as the

exclusive domain of scientific thinking (Patterson et al., p. 15, 1994).

The importance of the study of ethics in journalism cannot be understated because of the inherent power of information. But it is only useful if distributed, and that is where the power struggle lies. Traditionally the adversaries are governments and the public, fighting over the media as a method to take control of the information flow. Usually the dominant group, the one with power over the press, reins victorious as their knowledge, their interpretation, their ideals are passed onto the people. The spread of information, therefore, is intricately woven into the sometimes threadbare, sometimes thick fabric of politics, economics and social policy. The media, by definition, then, become an essential tool in containment and control. The method by which the media—television, radio, newspapers or magazines—is organized fits snugly into the style of leadership regime of country and community. What follows are some brief examples of various types of media systems and their accompanying influence.

The first is the Authoritarian media system, strongly undemocratic, where unilateral leadership holds complete control over the political process. All forms of communication are under strict regulations. There is no open public discussion.

Next is the Communist media system, a totalitarian strategy where all of society is the focus of government attention. There may be some opposition or contrary ideology, but as a rule, institutions must tow the line or they do not exist.

The Revolutionary media system is characterized by transition. A fractious segment of society is vying for control of communication systems as a way of

spreading their dissent. The challenge to authority usually drives the movement underground, so a dual process of communication, one official, one subversive, exists in the same society. It acts outside the rules, laws and regulations.

Another example is the Development media system which uses its communication media as nation building tools, promoting government policies by highlighting development successes. Used by Third World countries, this system propagates information the West would not consider news.

North American society, including Canada, has much less experience with the previous media systems than with the Libertarian and Social Responsibility ones. The first follows the “marketplace of ideas”. An analogous concept is one of a recipe. Throw in a dash of truth, a spoonful of hatred, a cup of propaganda, mix together, and the cream will always rise to the top. The Libertarian model encourages anything to go into the batter, but suggests that only the best, or the “right” ideas will emerge. As a result, the media are encouraged to be open and free. There would, therefore, be no threat from false, or irrational ideas. Evolving from the societal changes sweeping Europe during the dissolution of the Reformation into the Renaissance era, the libertarian theory falls in line with the philosophy of Enlightenment. It assumes that people are

rational and that truth is discoverable in a secular, empirical way...Under [the theory that individuals are rational and therefore the government should to the individual's bidding], the press's most potent antagonist would be government, which libertarians viewed as locked in a perpetual power struggle for political supremacy with the individual. The duty of the press was to support the individual in that fight. The result was a media system that supported a well-informed individual in a quest for well-being and happiness(Patterson et al.,

p. 171, 1994).

Yet this past century there has been a shift away from the libertarian theory to a more provisional relativist position. The Social Democratic media system, also known as the Social Responsibility philosophy, works on the assumption that, in fact, people are not necessarily rational. They can be lazy and selfish, acting in their own self-interest. With a recognition of so much cultural diversity in a libertarian society, the idea that there can be only one “right” answer loses credibility. Some degree of government intervention into the media would prove necessary to make sure all voices are heard. It proposes the media, with extensive powers of influence, should use its institutional position for good. The media has responsibilities in society. According to the Hutchins Commission, a 1947 American investigation into the field of journalism, the media need to “provide a truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that gives meaning, serve as a forum for exchange of comment and criticism, provide a representative picture of constituent groups in society, present and clarify the goals and values of society and provide citizens with full access to the day’s intelligence” (Patterson et al., p. 172, 1994).

As explicit recognition of the press’s duties in society increases by both the public and newsmakers alike, social responsibility gains credibility. Many of the principles behind the Hutchins Commission’s vision of journalism stand as the guiding ideals of current day media. A licensing system would simply formalize those beliefs into an industry-wide code as a way of explicitly acknowledging the goals journalists attempt to live up to.

As a way for readers to understand that journalists are acting in the most appropriate ethical manner, registering members of the media would ensure that people in the industry have been made aware of their obligations. Many journalists claim to instinctively know what is “right”, what is ethical (Boomer, personal interview, 1999). But formal education about their professional obligations as well as the various methods by which to solve ethical dilemmas will take the guesswork out of the equation. Readers will therefore be able to trust that a journalist has the ability to clearly reflect and analyse a situation, should ethical or moral conflicts arise.

“Ethics could become a more important part of journalism education than it is now, so that the professional values with which young journalists identify can be more firmly grounded in moral principles” (Voakes, p. 32, 1997).

Even before learning how to consciously evaluate an ethical dilemma, journalists need to understand their own motivations and loyalties. They can be broken down into five categories of obligation. Each reporter, each person, has an inherent duty to him or herself. Every individual grew up with differing social backgrounds and values. Some are religious, some are familial. Regardless of what others think, a journalist will still have his or her own sense of right and wrong. It plays an enormous role in how they react in their professional lives. There is also a feeling of responsibility toward the clients—the readers, the advertisers and shareholders. The sense of duty stems from the obvious assumption that without these participants, there would be no newspaper, no job. For all the controversy about lack of public trust in the media, there is little question that journalists feel an obligation toward the readers. The

problem is perception. The readers sense that the media's primary commitment, instead of to them, is to the newspaper itself in a bid for higher circulation figures and higher profits. Company policy, as a result, seems, to the public, to be the most influential of obligations. Yet that conclusion does not take into account the community of journalists to whom individual members of the media feel attached. Professional colleagues, the people who understand the pressures and rewards of the job, become the only ones who can appreciate the standards and conditions under which they work. The final obligation that factors into a journalist's responsibility is to society. This relates back to the social responsibility theory that suggests the media has duties in society because of its position as a public institution. Newspapers and other media outlets may be privately owned, but the fact remains, nonetheless, that news is a public trust. It's a currency that journalists ignore at their peril.

Academic research into obligations journalists feel reveal how each one—from personal duty, and client-driven responsibility to professional, organizational and societal commitments—influences the newsmaking process. One study by U.S. researcher Paul Voakes “seems to challenge a traditional assumption that in ethical dilemmas, journalists are autonomous moral agents, acting on the basis of their own values alone. Th[e] data supports the notion of a far more dynamic and complex pattern of social influences” (Voakes, p. 18, 1997).

Even with the knowledge of where their moral values come from, journalists would be shortchanging the reading public of highly ethical reporting if they cannot articulate

the way in which they arrived at their judgment calls. The point of ethical education is to deliberately verbalize a process that many journalists perform automatically and instinctively. Since many ethical decisions are made every day in journalism, some more difficult than others, a knowledge of models of moral reasoning would more clearly define for reporters the best method of approaching ethical dilemmas.

As in society in general, a newsroom must have at least some agreement as to the basic principles and values, regardless of the relative opinions of individuals. Some of the accepted values may clash, however, in a particular situation (for example the right to privacy for a source versus the public's right to know). It is essential, when examining an issue, to understand how to identify which values are at stake so that the final decision can be convincingly defended.

One method designed to address moral problems is the Potter's Box. Dr. Ralph Potter, of Harvard Divinity School, developed this model of moral reasoning in a problem-solving manner. Identify the problem, propose a hypothesis, research all the pertinent information, draw conclusions and act on the results. Potter drew a box with four quadrants around these concepts. In the upper left hand corner is "definition". Directly below it, is "values". Beside values, in the lower right hand corner comes "principle," and directly above that is "loyalties." Potter then added arrows which flow down from definition to values, across to principle and up to loyalties (Christians et al, p. 3, 1995). To begin, identify what the issue is by defining the situation. Then ask why. Why is this issue important? Why is this controversial? Next, name the ethical principle involved (Conflict of interest? Invasion of privacy?),

and finally, examine the loyalties of the person making the decision. With whom do they lie? With the public? The news organization? Colleagues? If the loyalties conflict, then a deeper examination of motivation is required (Christians et al., p. 4, 1995).

An example to illustrate the Potter's Box at work is provided by Professor Roger Bird. He explains that as a young reporter he was working in the editing booth, hurriedly getting a TV story together about a devastating high-rise fire in Brazil. He admits the only reason he and his co-workers were looking at it was its sensational footage. The film showed people jumping to their deaths, and the news crew was trying to edit the tape so viewers would not have to see the victims hit the ground. Professor Bird acknowledges, years later, that it wasn't until long after the clip had aired did he consider the ethical consequences. The fire did not meet one important factor of newsworthiness—proximity—but it was sensational.

While individuals will come up with different responses to the questions asked in Potter's box, one possibility may be this: In brief, the definition of the dilemma, is whether the tape had enough news value to run as a story or if it was being used in a solely sensationalistic fashion. The values could include the respect for human life, or the public's right to know. Journalistic principles may pit the worth of the news story for the local community against ratings, and finally an examination of loyalties may reveal there is a stronger sense of duty to the news organization and to competing colleagues, hence, the best decision under the circumstances is to run the tape. It is more important that the decision be effectively defended rather than

popular. “As U.S. journalism teacher John C. Merrill suggests, journalism ethics are “a swampland of philosophical speculation where erie mists of judgment hang low over a boggy terrain” (Russell, p. ix, 1994).

Other models of moral reasoning, the process by which a behaviour is turned into action through the use of rules, or ethics, follow a similar problem-solving pattern to that of the Potter’s Box. SAD, or Situation, Analysis, Definition begins the same way (Day, p. 64, 1997). Gather as much information as possible to fully understand the issue. This model combines Potter’s two steps of principles and values into the first step. The analysis may ask questions such as: What duties does the journalist have to the identified principles? What external or extenuating circumstances may play a role? What are the possible outcomes? What applicable ethical theories are there? Again, once the decision is made, it must be defended.

The last example of moral reasoning methods, or procedures which define the behaviour upon which ethics are based, falls much more closely into the culture of journalism. Canadian author Nick Russell applies “the Five W’s” to ethical dilemmas. With the issue in mind, the point is to answer these questions:

Who gains or loses by this story? Who cares? Who gets hurt? What does it do for my credibility? Will the audience think less of this newsroom for running these details? What has been newsroom practice in the past? What are the alternatives? When should we publish this? Where should it be published? Why withhold or run this? To be first? To inform? Why is the source doing this? How was this material gathered? How might the process affect the story? How was it corroborated for fairness and accuracy? (Russell, p. 9, 1994).

The questions and the guidelines to help answer those questions are an essential part of a journalist's job. They must be at the forefront of a journalist's mind when confronted with ethical issues in order to know that the decision was the best one at the time and under those specific circumstances. But a formal system of education on the topic is necessary to ensure all journalists working in the industry understand how to deal with ethical dilemmas. A license can ensure that the proper level of awareness is met so readers can take confidence in the decisions made by the media.

Chapter Five

Objectivity: The Gaining Struggle of Moral Relativism and the Notion of Truth

Whether individual readers will agree with the ethical and professional decisions made by journalists is only knowable after the fact. How then, to address the concerns of the public who dispute the “right” answer?

Acknowledging the readers’ position is a first step. But in order to satisfactorily understand the direction from which the individuals come, a broader appreciation of the differences inherent in a pluralistic society such as Canada is needed. Mutual respect is required of any relationship, including the one between reporter and reader, which requires recognition on the part of both parties of the range of opinion, interpretation and bias.

The society, is therefore relative to the personal experiences of each individual. This includes morality, values, and the basic sense of right and wrong. As this chapter will outline, moral relativism and the variability of truth exist in Canadian society. But a recognition of such philosophies does not mean full surrender to them and their potential nihilistic effects. Instead, a system of licensing for journalists is an example of provisional relativism. Acknowledge that there are diverse values, but insist on a version (as opposed to “the” version) to dominate as a baseline for the behaviour of, in this case, journalists. A standard is needed in a relative world to provide guidance

for expectations. By having a formalized system in place, both the readers and the journalists will know the moral and ethical positions by which the whole industry is to operate.

The journalism world is slowly opening itself up to the acceptance of a relative society.

The stance of detachment, the claim of neutral observation, is no longer tenable. All news reports have their own socially produced standpoints; no knowledge is produced in an entirely disinterested and value-free fashion... Our rejection of objectivism does not come from a perspective that has abandoned the ideal of truth-telling, but rather from adherence to a more complex, ample recursive, self-critical concept of that vocation (Hackett et al., p. 135, 1998).

Ironically, objectivity, as a concept of detached journalism practice, used to provide the basis for media credibility in the past. The concept of non-partisan, unprejudiced storytelling cemented the press's reputation with the public for ferreting out news and scandal that politicians, businesses and institutions would prefer to bury deep. It also provided the reason the media needed to keep its watchdog role separate from its position in the power elite. If news stories were neutral, then no undo influence by advertisers or other interests could corrupt the papers. Global corporate interests are therefore better served if they hide, or at least downplay the fact that they are private employers? "Now, more than ever before, perhaps, the great potential private power over public agenda, hidden behind a mask of objectivity, is imperiling political democracy" (Hackett et al., p. 5, 1998).

But no longer can the media shy from its corporate roots. Journalism does not and cannot work in a vacuum, as it, by definition, needs to reflect and report on the

communities in which it works. Still, not all of objectivity should be dismissed. While journalism must acknowledge its own biases, and be candid about its roles as private business and public institution, it does not have to acquiesce to an “anything goes” attitude in the face of relativism. The positive values of objectivity, such as fair, balanced, accurate reporting can still serve as a valuable teaching tool today.

Objectivity, as “a search for hard facts to contextualize a dispute” for example, led journalists and readers to new heights of research, investigation and analysis as the root causes of news stories was uncovered. (Hackett et al., p. 82, 1998). Even in a relative society there remain public standards and morality (shifting as they might be, but nonetheless real) which the media helps to identify and define (Hackett et al., p. 135, 1998).

But it is no longer enough to accept past philosophies without question. The media’s power to create news and affect reality, as opposed to merely reflecting it, is of too great a consequence to leave old ideas in place. Objectivity, and its baggage of value-neutral language and expression, is inherently dangerous to the changing, pluralistic, and some would argue, postmodern society of today. The notion of impartial fact, without bias or interpretation must be contested if different voices of a community are to be heard.

The concept of objectivity as an ideal to separate facts from values, peaked at a time that mono-cultural paternalism ruled the day, when white men were the only people to speak. Now there are others who demand to be represented in the press: visible minorities, immigrants, Aborigines, women, the disabled. Whose version of

events to believe? Whose truth? How, if the media holds onto its outdated love of objectivity, can they effectively report on all angles of a story?

Readers are also more weary of news reports in light of the surge in the public relations and media relations industry. There's a finely-tuned dance between journalists and their institutional sources, a symbiosis in which the information managers need journalists as much as journalists need PR agents. Is a story still considered objective if a spin is put on the information before it even reaches the news room?

In a new information era, where a battle for information control is heating up, the press needs to reexamine itself, and the instigation of a licensing system would provide just that opportunity.

The media could, for instance, institutionalize self-reflexivity (if that is not a contradiction in terms). Journalists and their audiences need to analyse the fundamental biases and impacts of news discourse...to consider how the audience is being addressed. We need more media commentary from outside the objectivity paradigm, and a more open acknowledgment of journalism's intrinsic values and interests. Such self-reflexivity would help open up debate about alternative values and interests that journalism should serve (Hackett et al., p. 233, 1998).

The media's self-examination needs to seriously consider the slippery notion of truth. This paper is not arguing to drop the ideal from journalistic values, but rather, to understand, and work within its limitations in a relative society. How is it at all possible to accept, as undisputed, the truth? Its very philosophy is obscure. Truth cannot stand on its own, as an independent quality. It must be accompanied by

context. Journalists and readers ask for and debate the truth *about* a situation or circumstance.

The search for the final, incontestable truth, in itself, contradicts the imperative of democracy. “The result is a closing down of the plurality of truths that should be allowed expression under democratic order” (Stevenson, p. 231, 1997). Freedom of expression, guaranteed in the Canadian Charter, allows for the declaration of all ideas, including those claimed to be the truth by some and rejected by others. To restrict truth to an absolute definition leaves open the possibility of censorship.

That is not to say that “a” truth, as defined by the segment in society to which an individual belongs cannot be found. The search for the truth which best reflects the values and ethics of the individual is still a cherished ideal. It is the pinnacle for which citizens in this society are encouraged to strive. The danger, however, is to place truth too high on a pedestal, making the concept of attainability impossible. That can ultimately lead to skepticism and cynicism about its worth.

The commitment to truth is perhaps the most ancient and revered ethical principle of human civilization...the idea of truth as a positive value is well entrenched in moral and legal philosophy. But if the truth were so sacred, why is honesty so often the first thing to be compromised when it is in our self-interest to do so? The tendency toward dishonesty is as much a part of human nature and societal norms as telling the truth (Day, p. 72-3, 1997).

Truth itself has a history as old as civilization, its definition and philosophy changing with the context of the eras (Patterson et al., p. 20, 1994). The Ancient Greeks equated truth with what is memorable and what is handed down. If it is worth preserving for the next generation, it must be the truth. A memory of significance,

passed on became the honored ideal. Plato said truth is what abides in the world of perfect form, a definition people today may consider unrealistic. During medieval times, ultimate truth rested with the King, Church or God. Authority figures of the era determined what was truth. The words of the rulers were to be accepted, without question, as the truth. Milton believed truth to be what emerged from the “marketplace of ideas”. The same theory subscribed to by the Libertarian media system, the marketplace encouraged all information to be mixed together, with the certain knowledge that the truth, what was right, would stand above all the rest. The Enlightenment period suggested the truth is what is verifiable, as well as replicable and universal. Still predominant today, this notion of truth is reflected in such entrenched societal systems as the Scientific Method. It relies on the rational and objective to discover the truth divorced from suspect and abstract influences such as feelings, bias and interpretation. The concept is being challenged by modern-day pragmatism, which believes truth is what is filtered through individual perceptions (Patterson et al., p. 20, 1994). It is the foundation for moral relativism, the philosophy of this thesis.

Truths change over time. Consider that human civilization once believed the idea that the Earth is round was preposterous, that Galileo was jailed during the Spanish Inquisition for questioning the “truth” of the time. Or that it was once “truth” that women were property of men and black people were an inferior race. Those “truths” have today been shattered. What truths does the society today cling to that may later be proven false, or at least different?

“[A]s ideas and world views shift, so does the definition of truthfulness.

Newspeople must live within the larger ambiguities about truth in western scholarship and culture today. Their situation is further complicated by budget constraints, deadlines, reader expectations, editorial conventions and self-serving sources” (Christians et al., p. 51, 1995).

Truth is a belief that cannot be separated from culture. If the media is to be representative of the multi-cultural society in which it now operates, it must accept that truth, like beauty may be in the eye of the beholder.

If truth is subjective, can it be best be obtained and reported by an impassive, objective and detached reporter? Does such a reporter exist? Is truth a construct that relies on the context of the source, the message and the receiver?

In short, less than fifty years after it evolved, the concept of objectivity which was once equated with printing the truth, has been deeply undermined by both philosophical shift and technological innovation (Patterson et al., p. 22, 1994).

A simple example of colour can illustrate the point that “truth” may vary from one individual to the next. The same shade or hue of a primary colour could be interpreted with many different names. Blue, for example, could been seen by some as just that: blue, while other may believe the same colour to be aqua, teal, turquoise, azure, or even green. How is this possible if there is truth? The colours are relative to the experience of the viewer. If one individual contrasts the colour to navy, for example, he or she might consider the first one green, in comparison, while a second person, thinking about grass, may call the colour blue. Is one of them wrong? Or both? Are the conditions under which both individuals saw the colour the same? What if the

room was darker for the first and brighter for the second? Would environment and atmosphere make a difference in their responses?

The news business is always pitting one truth against another, one side of an argument or debate against another. But the journalists are the messengers. What if one reporter sees the issue as blue, but a second one understands the same issue to be green? Are the readers getting truth?

Yes and no. The readers may not be getting “the absolute truth” (an impossibility for pragmatists) nor may they be getting the truth as they themselves might have interpreted it. Reader number one reads about the blue issue, but, had he or she been there first hand, would have called it green. Perhaps the opposite is true of reader number two, who would have referred to it as the blue issue, reads about it as green. Yet, regardless of the exact word used to describe the colour, each reader understands it to be in the cool-colour family. The description is relative to the interpretation, first of the writer, and secondly of the reader, based on their own experience of blues and greens, but none of the individuals see red, yellow, or orange. Relativity, then, must be in relation to *something*. The various names used to describe the same colour come from a scale on either side of the primary colour itself.

The proposed license for journalists would be the primary colour equivalent. With standards set up that would be theoretically equivalent to the current codes of ethics and mission statements, both journalists and readers are provided with a base from which they react relatively. If the standard states, as do many newspaper codes of ethics, that journalists should accept no gifts from sources as an attempt to pre-empt

the perception of bias, then one reporter may refuse even a cup of coffee. The other, however, accepts the coffee, but refuses a bottle of wine. Their responses are different, but relative to the standard. The spirit of the mandate, then, is clear to both.

The license, therefore, recognizes relativism, allows for it, but still sets out the values and ethics decided on by the majority for journalists and readers to understand and follow.

“Like jeans and health food, ethical relativism has in recent years begun to shed its counterculture appearance and enter the establishment. While cognitive relativism withdraws increasingly to the fringes of the academic world, ethical relativism, fitted out with a new, less threatening image, is gaining wide respectability” (Fleischacker, p. 1, 1992).

While this paper suggests a need for provisional relativism, to have absolutes in place as a way of mitigating the potential for nihilism, there are benefits to moral and other forms of relativism that can help both journalists and readers. These benefits can be easily incorporated into a licensing system so the best of relativism is kept, the worst tossed away.

Moral relativism creates a tolerance of difference that absolutism cannot. If an individual believes his or her way is the *only* way, how then can he or she accept customs or traditions from different cultures? Canadian history indicates that acceptance of others did not occur. When European settlers first arrived in the New World, their immediate task was that of assimilation. The Aborigines, and later visible minorities, and the disabled, were forced into the mold of the dominant culture

without consideration to their own values, morals and ethics. Moral relativism, on the other hand, allows a place for the different voices. "Moral right and wrong are relative matters. A given act can be right with respect to one system of moral co-ordinates and wrong with respect to another" (Harman, p. 13, 1996).

Moral nihilism differs because its subscribers believe there is no morality, nothing is out there. Relativism, in opposition, accepts diversity instead of erasing it.

Journalists and the public alike are served by such views. Racial, cultural and societal tolerance can lead to more peaceful communities. Acknowledgment of differences could also lead to a reduction of conflicts, both journalistically and publicly. The concept is reflected in the expression "to walk a mile in someone else's shoes."

A valid criticism against accepting all diversity as merely a reflection of a different moral standard is the potential that no judgment of another moral system would be allowed. Take the example of Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust during the Second World War. By all accounts of Western morality, the man was a monster for wreaking such fundamental destruction on the European Jews. In a relativist position, though, would it not be impossible to make such a statement? Would an individual, by virtue of relativism, be required to accept Hitler's actions as valid according to his own morality?

No. Moral relativism does not mean acquiescing to all other forms of morality. It is possible to judge others based on a certain moral stance. Hitler must be condemned according to judgment made by Western values. Relativism takes the stage by

reminding those who judge that they do so based on their own way of thinking. While this is not wrong, it is still important to recognize that the person being judged—Hitler, in this example—does not abide by the same standards. According to the Nazi morality, what Hitler did was as right to him as it was wrong to the rest of Western civilization. Does society, then, have to accept the deeds simply because Hitler thought he was right? No, as philosopher Gilbert Harman explains.

Moral relativists need not be tolerant of harms committed by criminals who have not accepted conventional morality. There are strong self-interested reasons for us to include in our moral understanding the proviso that we can use force against those who harm others. There are not similarly strong self-interested reasons for vegetarians to include in their moral understanding the condition that they can use force against those who raise animals for food (Harman, p. 58, 1996).

Subjectivity, as the relativist representative in journalism, has already found a place in newspapers. There are, of course, the feature articles, profiles, reviews, which are common staples in most media outlets. But there's also New Journalism, or literary journalism that was pioneered by the likes of Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Truman Capote in the 1960s. These daily news reporters and writers gathered information and reported it as accurately as a hard-news piece, yet they borrowed techniques from fiction to include scene-setting and description, dialogue, and even interior monologue (Weber, p. 18, 1974). The articles, as a result, read more like a novel, or short story, than something found in the newspaper. Subjectivity does not have to mean a lack of accurate, well-researched writing. It means instead that the people who choose to write in a subjective style do so with conscious thought that is made clear to the readers. "[H]ow you tell a story is just as important as what you

tell... ‘You can’t shirk analysis. You can always find a way to be rigorous about the facts and tell it as a story. You have to make it readable,’ [said Canadian reporter Ian Brown]” (Roberts, p. 11, 12, 1997).

Even on closer examination of hard-news stories, evaluative language can be found. Value-neutral reporting is only a concept not realizable in a relative society. As soon as a reporter commits words to paper that he or she thinks are neutral, a reader, with a different opinion on the subject can just as quickly take issue with choice of words. There are, ultimately, different viewpoints to every story. However, the majority of viewpoints in Canada, reflected by morality and ethics, are usually closely related to a common standard, as teal and azure are closely related to blue. The action that needs to be taken, therefore, is to articulate that standard for all to see and judge.

In effect, then, the balance between moral relativism and an absolute such as a system of licensing rests with the simple act of communication. The media tell the public to which moral, ethical and professional standards they adhere, and the public, in turn, will evaluate the news product based on their own biases and experiences, and communicate their satisfaction (or dissatisfaction, as the next chapter will discuss) by continuing to buy the newspaper.

Chapter Six

Accountability: Why the Current Safeguards Do Not Work; Why Licensing Will

If journalism is a public trust, then there must be consequences for breaking that trust. Conceding to each reader's whim about what is right is not only an unwelcome concept, it is also impossible, but there must still be accountability on the part of the media for concerns of legitimate dissatisfaction felt by the public. There are, of course, methods of accountability in place now, without a system of licensing, but as this chapter will demonstrate, all of them come up short of proper redress since none have any means of enforceability. Decisions made to rectify a conflict between readers and newspapers are subject only to the cooperation of the news organization. Accountability now works on a type of honour system. A noble theory, perhaps, but one in which the complainant has no guarantee of the media's dedication to correction or revision. "When challenged with their errors or misjudgments, these editors are apt to react with wounded vanity, hurt pride or abject denial—behaviour so typical it was branded as 'notorious' by the 1981 Kent Royal Commission on Newspapers. It is not correct to call this thin-skinned; it's more like scraping an exposed nerve end and watching them yawp" (Miller, p. 36, 1998).

Miller gives an example of this behaviour. In Burnaby B.C., Chun Chau Wong gave birth to Tin Wing, the first baby of 1994, but was denied the traditional gifts from the

Welcome Wagon when the club discovered the mother was from Hong Kong. The *Vancouver Sun* reported it was typical of wealthy foreigners from Hong Kong to deliver “passport babies”, who automatically gain Canadian citizenship. The story made national news around the country, and was even followed up by an editorial holding this issue up as an example of Canada’s immigration problem. The problem, however, was that it turned out not to be true. The father was a landed immigrant, away on business when the baby was born prematurely. While the mistake could have been made as a result of language and cultural differences, the *Sun* never apologized. Instead it ran another story saying the parents had set the record straight, “as if it had been their fault from the beginning. This prompted an outraged letter to the editor from city councillor Maggie Ip, who accused the paper of promoting racial disharmony by its negligent reporting” (Miller, p. 36, 1998).

A license, as a method of accountability, would not only clearly identify the standards to which the media are expected to adhere, but also allow for enforceability of the standards should it be proved that a journalist broke them. The system would also benefit reporters, not just readers, when it comes to accountability. They would be able to produce, for a complainant without just cause, a written document as proof that the journalists had acted in a professional manner.

A news event may legitimately give rise to a number of different interpretations and reports. If they are all consistent with the known facts, then all well and good: journalists cannot necessarily know which one is, in fact, true.

Thus, it is imperative for good journalism to articulate clearly why they think that their interpretation most appropriately fits the story...what the actual or possible anomalies in such interpretations are (Kieran, p. 60, 1997).

The designation of registration then, would add more credibility and control to an industry increasingly regarded with suspicion by the public. “[American journalist] Seymore Krim...insists that the reporter must ‘declare his credentials (to the reader) by revealing the concrete details and particular sweat of his own inner life; otherwise he (or she) will not have earned the right to speak openly about everything or be trusted” (Weber, p. 19, 1974).

That trust between the public and the media is earned when readers and reporters each feel the relationship is on somewhat of an equal footing. This is not the case when the issue turns to accountability. Journalists against whom a complaint is lodged hold the balance of power now because they (or their employers) are in control of the means of redress. This is not to say there is no value in the current methods. A licensing system is not proposing to eliminate all the public avenues to the newspapers available now. To the contrary, a license would recognize that some of them, such as letters to the editor play a vital function in readership feedback. What the proposal suggests, instead, is to give teeth to a regulatory body modeled on already existing methods like press councils and ombudsmen.

But without that method of enforceability now, the reader is at the mercy of the media. Take letters to the editor, for example. While they provide space for readers’ comments, criticism and reflections, the section is nonetheless firmly in control of the editors. With the best of intentions, no doubt, and the limited space with which they have to work, editors must carefully select and edit from a pile of mail they receive daily. Not all complaints can therefore be addressed in this manner.

A recent academic study illustrates the point. “The glut of articles about Americans’ rampant dislike of the press might lead one to believe that public anger would translate into a sizzling stack of letters to the editors in contemporary magazines. If that is the case, then the question arises: How do contemporary letters about the media compare with letters to the editor from an earlier era?” (Thornton, p. 40, 1998). Thornton proceeds to compare the letters about journalistic standards published in 10 popular magazines between 1982 and 1992 with those of popular magazines published between 1902 and 1912. True, the economy, society and the news industry were vastly different between the two time periods, but the early part of the century was renowned for its muckraking journalism, a reputation that compares with the growing sense of media sensationalism by the public. Thornton, of course, acknowledges the variables and adds another complication: “letters to the editor are sifted through the hands of gatekeeper editors” (Thornton, p. 24, 1998). Still, factoring in the differences, the researcher found only 3.5 per cent of contemporary letters to the editors dealt with issues such as truthfulness, honesty and accuracy. Interestingly, 30.1 per cent of the letters from the turn of the century addressed them. Why the difference? Thornton makes no definitive conclusions although one hypothesis he proposes is a distancing of readers from journalists today. He concludes the paper with a call for closer examination of audience reaction and discussion of journalistic standards through letters to the editor.

Letters to the editor, therefore, simply do not go far enough to make journalists accountable to their readers. A more rigid, structured system should be put in place to address public concerns.

There are, in fact, some methods of accountability open to readers which leaves them in complete control. Unfortunately, if they aren't too costly to the complainant, then they are impractical or self-defeating. The most obvious course of action against a newspaper is for a reader to cancel his or her subscription. The newspaper may lose some revenue and circulation, but even more importantly, the reader loses, too. In many Canadian cities there is only one daily newspaper, so a canceled subscription means an end to print journalism for the reader. The individual could still follow the news through TV or radio newscasts, but if his or her preference is to read, there are no alternatives. Even if there were other daily newspapers from which to choose, many papers come from different ideological backgrounds, affecting their coverage of events. A disgruntled reader of a conservative daily may not feel a liberal tabloid would suffice.

Alternately, a reader could sue the newspaper—for example, if it had printed allegedly libelous statements. The law is available as a recourse for the complainant, yet it could become an exorbitantly expensive option, one that many people may not be able to afford. Or, perhaps the complaint does not fall under the law, but rather under the ethical principles to which the reader believes the journalist was obliged. In the Milewski case, for example, the Prime Minister's office lodged a complaint to the

CBC ombudsmen (a method of accountability to be presently addressed) about biased reporting, which is an ethical and professional controversy as opposed to a legal one.

Lobbying is another route open to the public, but considering the amount of time, and energy required for such an undertaking, many readers might feel the burden would be too much trouble for very little chance of success. Some members of the public may also resent the effort they must go to in order to resolve a problem they feel is the responsibility of the journalists.

Fighting fire with fire is also out of league for most readers. One method would be to take out ads in the paper as a way to contradict the offending message, story or publicity. Again, this costs money, and a disadvantage still remains. Because ads are paid for as an explicit way to influence the public, readers generally take ads less seriously, or more dubiously than a news story. A complainant placing an ad in the newspaper may not receive the same amount of credibility as the original article. A second method to take on the newspapers on their own turf would be for readers to start up their own press. Theoretically sound, considering the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression through the press, it nonetheless causes practical difficulties, not the least of which is economies of scale. The amount of money and time it would take to begin a newspaper from scratch, buying the equipment necessary, hiring reporters, getting advertisers, would be prohibitive. Running a full business as a way to complain about a newspaper is excessive.

Besides the effort and initiative required on the part of the reader to realize these methods of accountability, it is not in the newspaper's best interest to drive

customers away, considering it can cost up to seven times as much to gain a new client as it does to keep an existing one. Some media experts agree the responsibility should rest on the journalists. "If we set ourselves up as guardians of the public trust, we ought to make sure we're respected. A system of licensing would go a long way to redressing [our credibility]. Journalism is not a profession now because it lacks the criteria: an industry-wide code of ethics, education standards, and a governing body to enforce those standards. There's no accountability and that's a problem" (Pohle, personal interview, 1999).

The role of ombudsmen is a step in the right direction. To have a staff member whose job is to mediate disputes between readers and journalists sounds similar to the suggestion of a regulatory body responsible for discipline in a licensing system. The philosophies are the same. To have a person around with whom a complainant could initially make contact if direct communication with the journalist or editor in question failed is a good safety valve. There must be measures in place to make sure the media are not maliciously or slanderously criticized, and the ombudsman could be a part of that. Yet there remain inherent problems with the position. The first one is respect. If the media outlet itself dismisses the value of the ombudsman, his or her position becomes null and void. It may sound harsh that journalists would not be more open to valid criticism, but some critics believe this to be the case.

The original idea—dreamed up in the 1960s by a *New York Times* editor, irritated by the "unshatterable smugness" of most publishers and editors—sounded good. It called for the ombudsman to act as a department of internal criticism at the newspaper.

According to critics, most ombudsmen have been more *deflectors* of

reader anger than *protectors* of the public. ...[F]lack-catching will continue to be the main role of the ombudsman (Starr, p. 19, 1992).

Secondly is the dilemma of perception. Whether the ombudsman is in actual fact as impartial as can be expected, the public may remain suspicious since his or her paycheque comes from the newspaper. An even deeper problem lies in the sad fact that the history of ombudsmen in North America shows many newspapers taking action against their ombudsman if he or she has sided with the reader. While it would seem logical for the newspaper to be interested in constructive feedback as a way of improving not only its image but also its bottom line, some papers have chosen to reject their ombudsmen's verdicts. "In 1972, Ben Bagdikian quit as ombudsman at the *Washington Post* because management wanted to restrict his criticisms of the paper. In 1980, the ombudsman at the *St. Petersburg Times* resigned after the newspaper's executive-editor told him to apologize for criticizing editorial policy" (Starr, p. 19, 1992). The first Canadian example of editorial pressure tactics on ombudsmen occurred in 1992. Barry Mullin, then ombudsman at the *Winnipeg Free Press* says he was forced out by demands from management that he apologize for a column that criticizes the newspaper for what he called a lapse in news judgment when an overall shift in the paper from hard to soft news was perceived. The Canadian Association of Journalists condemned the *Free Press*'s behaviour. "A newspaper that stifles criticism damages not only its own credibility—and therefore its own economic future—but tarnishes the reputation of all journalists and the industry in which we work" (Schmitz, p. 12, 1992).

The point of a regulatory body, then, would be to distance the method of accountability from both opponents of the conflict--the public and the media. A sense of distance leads to, at the very least, the perception of fairness. The members of the regulatory body, because they would not be employees of the defending newspaper, would be free to enforce their decisions without fear of job reprisal. Having the authority to back up their findings entrusts to the members a certain amount of credibility and respect.

Underlying the notion of media accountability is the assumption that journalists and news organizations are more likely to behave in a manner that society would define as responsible if they know that they may be required to explain their behaviour. A system of media accountability is centered around a set of principles that define (or at least delimit) responsible media behaviour (Pritchard, p. 74, 1991).

Press councils most closely resemble the practical incarnation of media accountability theory--with the one fundamental, crucial difference that they cannot enforce their decisions.

Starting to spring up in the 1970s in the wake of the Davey report on mass media and the threat of government intervention, press councils were mandated to hear public complaints. Paid for by member newspapers, they were expected to address issues relating only to its members.

The Ontario Press Council, the oldest and largest which began in 1972 and now includes all of the province's 39 dailies and more than 240 community newspapers (Miller, p. 43, 1998), has received 2,673 complaints up to 1995. The council adjudicated 437 of them, upholding all or part of 218 and dismissing 210, some with

reservations. Two cases were withdrawn, and there have been no decisions on the remaining ones (www.ontpres.com).

Quebec and Alberta soon followed the Ontario Press Council's lead, but it took the Kent Commission in 1981, with renewed threats of government regulations to get the Atlantic Provinces and British Columbia on side. Saskatchewan remains the only Canadian province without a press council.

Their objectives reflect the direction in which a licensing system should go. The Ontario Press Council defines them:

- to defend the freedom of the press on behalf of the public and press alike
- to serve as a medium of understanding between the public and the press
- to encourage the highest ethical, professional, commercial standards of journalism
- to consider complaints from the public about the conduct of the press in gathering and publication of news and opinions
- to consider complaints from the members of the press about the conduct of individuals toward the press and to report publicly on the action taken
- to review and report on attempts to restrict access to information of public interest
- to make representations to governments and other bodies on matters relating to the Ontario Press Council
- to publish periodic reports recording the work of the Council and to exchange information with other Press Councils (www.ontpres.com).

The criticism with press councils is not their motivation, nor intentions. Instead, it lies with their implementation. Press councils are ineffective to adequately address the concerns of media accountability. Firstly, membership is voluntary, which leads to the potential that at any time any newspaper may withdraw, eliminating the closest thing the public has to an impartial hearing. While all Ontario dailies are a part of the press council, the mere suggestion that newspapers decide if they will be accountable

is unacceptable in an industry of public trust. Another problem is visibility. Many readers are not even aware of their existence. "Ontario Press Council chair Willard (Bud) Estey criticize[d] newspapers for not telling readers that they belong to such a thing or how to make a complaint" (Miller, p. 44, 1998). How useful can an organization be in promoting awareness, understanding and dialogue between the media and the public if they remain almost invisible? As an anecdotal piece of evidence, a smart, third-year journalism student writing an essay on media concentration of ownership that included a substantial bibliography did not uncover the existence of press councils in her research. If information about the organizations is difficult to find in books and articles relating specifically to the media, how are lay readers with a complaint suppose to learn about them?

In *Yesterday's News*, Miller also criticizes press councils as a system that protects its own and undermines the public trust (Miller, p. 45, 1998). As evidence, he points to the case of Doug Collins, a Vancouver columnist in his late 70s who continuously rants against "'turban lovers', Jews who control Hollywood, and gays and lesbians" (Miller, p. 45, 1998). Yet the British Columbia Press Council has twice in four years defended Collins right to say that the Holocaust did not occur. "[T]hat any press council would defend it, especially after much of it was unmasked as ridiculous tripe based on a distortion of facts that should alarm anyone who cares about the state of journalism" (Miller, p. 45, 1998). The Press Council argued that Collins was entitled to his opinion, as was the complainant, a retired university professor, but Miller rebuts

“[t]his...ignored two facts: Collins had no evidence to back up his claim--indeed, all of his experts said the opposite of what he claimed; and the professor wasn't a columnist who enjoyed three-times-a-week access to the public for his opinions...The press council took two years to adjudicate this complaint and clearly failed to stand up for the public's right not to be deliberately misled (Miller, p. 45, 1998).

Another problem with press councils of deep concern is their inability to enforce any of their decisions. The most they have the power to do is ask member newspapers to publish their findings. Newspapers are not obligated to comply. The control of information about resolutions of conflicts, then, continues to reside with the very people who were first accused of unethical or inappropriate behaviour. While the councils may side with the journalists, the danger persists that the media decide which results are published and which ones are not. If there are no repercussions for violating the values set out in the press councils' objectives, why should a newspaper bother to submit to its decisions?

This leads to the next dilemma encountered by press councils, one that a system of licensing cannot, in effect, resolve. The problem is support from the journalistic community for accountability organizations such as existing press councils or theoretical licensing bodies. If there is no political will on the part of the media community to accept, respect and honour a system of accreditation, education and ethical standards, any attempt from outside to establish one will fail. Journalism professor John Miller experienced this during his fight with the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association in 1993 (Miller, p. 116, 1998). Asked to participate in the revisions of the organization's Statement of Principles, Miller lobbied against

substituting it with something that wouldn't cause legal embarrassment. "...[I]f you write down your principles, someone might expect you to live up to them. This appears to scare the hell out of some people, especially lawyers who have to defend the conduct of the newspapers in court" (Miller, p. 116, 1998). Miller was outnumbered, however, and the editorial division committee chose to water down the Statement of Principles. "It was like watching doctors sit down in a room and vote to abandon the Hippocratic oath on grounds that it could get them in trouble someday" (Miller, p. 117, 1998). The situation, worsened, however, when, in January, 1995, the committee voted 6-1 to abolish altogether the Statement of Principles. "I was the only person there who felt that Canadian newspapers still needed to have industry-wide standards" (Miller, p. 118, 1998).

The lack of political will was responsible for the same fate of the National News Council in the United States. It lived for only 10 years before it was finally disbanded.

American journalist Mike Wallace explains.

The News Council did not have the power to sanction or to punish except through the glare of publicity. Unfortunately, there was too little enthusiasm for it among working journalists, and so it didn't garner much publicity, and it lasted only for 10 limping years. Why? Mainly because some leading journalists—Abe Rosenthal (and he acknowledges it), Walter Cronkite and others—claimed it was superfluous at best, and worse, that it would somehow shackle a free press" (Wallace, p. 22, 1995).

Perception also plays a key role in the effectiveness of press councils. Researcher David Pritchard examined Quebec's press council and discovered that impartiality was a problem. With more than 80 per cent of the council's funding coming from

news organizations, and with questions about who sits on the councils, Pritchard concludes the Quebec Press Council is reluctant to “question the rules of the journalistic game” (Pritchard, p. 88, 1991). As a result, he says, “The importance of deriving ethical principles and making them available to the public should not be minimized. Without such guidelines, media consumers are condemned to *ad hoc*—and too often *post hoc*—reasoning about responsible media behaviour” (Pritchard, p. 89, 1991).

For all the good intentions articulated by press councils’ objectives and even disregarding the numerous problems associated with them, these methods of accountability are not enough to pull journalists into the rank they so often refer to themselves as: professionals. Journalism is not considered a profession by any official standard, regardless of how many practitioners believe it to be so. To be considered a profession, the industry must have a formal code of ethics, education standards and a licensing body or disciplinary action. Journalism meets none of these criteria, but many members of the media still insist on the respect associated with a learned profession while rejecting all the accompanying accountability. The work journalists do certainly does deserves respect, especially because of its unique position as being the only type of private business enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (as freedom of expression stated in section 2(b). “Too many Canadians are ignorant of the seventeen words in section 2(b), that give constitutional protection to various types of “fundamental” freedoms. Because of its commercial nature, freedom of the press is in many ways the most vulnerable of those freedoms” (Miller, p. 108,

1998). But with rights come responsibility, and journalism needs to make that responsibility public by licensing its members.

A rallying cry against registering journalists is that they represent the general public, so how can you put limitations on them? A closer look at the work journalists do reveal they are not necessarily the ordinary man-on-the-street. To do their job properly, reporters need politicians, public relations agents and other institutionally powerful sources for their information. Forging such close relationships with the power elite blurs the line between journalists as outsiders and becoming one of the elite themselves.

More importantly, journalists have a very specific monopoly of knowledge. They become the experts in collecting, digesting, interpreting and disseminating information. Other members of the public take on different knowledge roles. As a result, individuals rely on the experts of other industries to participate fully in society. It is essential to recognize the specificity of what journalists do compared to their readers. Since the job, therefore, is so specialized, it makes sense to license its practitioners as a way of ensuring the public receives the quality expected with such specialization.

Critics opposed to a formal system of licensing also argue there is no need for such an institution because of the abundance of codes already in existence. They have a valid argument. A code of conduct, of ethics is vital to the industry's credibility.

Journalism, like many emerging professions, developed press codes as a means of improving standards and answering critics...Codes, therefore, were useful in publicizing the norms that an increasing number of journalists considered professional.

Press codes developed at time when the industry most needed a credibility

boost. Codes remain one of the best means of explaining the press's industry standards to individuals working in one of the most public occupations (Cronin, p. 897, 1995).

The recognition on the part of industry leaders of the need for codes to encourage ethical behaviour is a far cry from the hey-day of journalism in the late nineteenth century when reporters had the reputation of being hardened, low-life, trench-coat wearing, world-weary, competitive, underground figures. In fact, many journalists were not only unethical, their actions were often illegal. Researcher Fred Fedler discovered that between 1850 and 1950, journalists seemed willing to do anything to get a story. Use of deception, eavesdropping, kidnapping, stealing, political conflict of interest were all tactics employed by some journalists. Fedler recounts the tale of the first woman employed at the Salt Lake *Herald* in 1950 who admits to eavesdropping and burglary. "Muir overheard two deputies working unusually late, then saw one put some notes in her desk. Using a hairpin, Muir picked the lock. Reporters, she said, were so anxious to uncover exclusive stories that they had no scruples about such things" (Fedler, p. 163, 1997). These practices, however, Fedler concludes, have become rare, and when they are discovered, they're usually criticized.

It says a lot for members of the media that they have been able to clean up the industry's image from earlier decades by implementing various codes of ethics, but public wariness should make journalists consider taking the next step—licensing—to further their credibility.

The codes of ethics themselves vary from one news organization to the next. Some are fifty pages, others are only three, some more just a few lines, depending on the

number of words, prose and style the authors felt was necessary. There is no common standard, which is illustrated by the fact that neither the Canadian Newspaper Association nor the Canadian Association of Journalists have their own codes (www.cda.acj.ca; www.eagle.ca/caj, 1999). No other formal research into Canadian newspapers' codes of ethics has been done either. John Miller describes how ad hoc the codes are. "Not many other newspapers have written codes of conduct even today, as a show of hands at the 1994 Canadian managing editor's conference indicated. More than forty editors attended, but only five put up their hands when the question was asked" (Miller, p. 116, 1998). There is, therefore, a need to further study the existing codes as a way of proceeding with the implementation of a licensing system. That research, beyond the scope of this thesis which is arguing for the concept of a licensing system and leaving the details of such implementation to future investigation, would have its roots in the variety of codes that now exist. For example, the CBC's code ran for 161 pages, detailing in great specifics what is expected of their journalists; Carleton University's Journalism School's lasted only three. But regardless of the length, a common thread runs through each of them. It is this thread that ties them together as a conceptual guideline for a code of ethics that would be included in a licensing system. The themes of truth, honesty, fairness, accuracy and integrity turn up as the type of ethical behaviour journalists strive to use. The U.S. Society for Professional Journalists's Guiding Principles portion of their code best summarizes the media's moral purpose:

- **Seek truth and report it:** Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.
- **Minimize harm:** Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving respect.
- **Act independently:** Journalists should be free of obligation to any other interest other than the public's right to know.
- **Be accountable:** Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other (Tallent, p. 42, 1997).

The difficulty with these codes is similar to that of press councils. Their goals are honourable, their mandate full of integrity. Yet, like press councils, there is no enforceability. While some news organizations fire or suspend staff for code of ethics violations, there is no provision anywhere that says media outlets must take action. Also, a dismissed journalist would conceivably be able to start work again at a different newspaper, perhaps in a different town without knowledge of his or her previous actions.

Another concern about the codes of ethics is simply that they are too numerous. There needs to be one standard nationwide—or, at the very least, province wide. Every journalist would be working from the same rule book, and accountable for the same standards. The principles outlined above could be a valuable frame of reference from which to create the standards and code of ethics for a licensing system. There would be a need to evaluate in depth the methods and thought processes by which these principles, and other codes' standards were developed as a template for deciding on the industry-wide standard. Of course, it would be impossible to address every ethical situation a journalist might run into, but some clear guidelines, along with mandatory training about how best to use those guidelines, would be an essential

journalistic tool. “To improve its credibility and level of respect with the public, but far more importantly, a more ethical profession, it is essential that journalists have some reasoned framework within which to make their difficult decisions” (Payne, p. 6, 1992).

There is always a threat that with a formalized standard to which reporters are accountable, a “libel-freeze” suspicion take root. This is where journalists feel (rightly or wrongly) that no matter what they do or write, they are in danger of being criticized by readers who will use the system to their own advantage. A licensing system is not meant as punishment, though. Should a journalist be accused of breaking the code of ethics, a fair hearing, where innocent until proven guilty, would be convened. Other steps, such as talks with the editors or publishers of the paper would be recommended as means to a resolution before the case went to the regulatory board. It will be challenge for the implementors of the licensing system to balance the rights and responsibilities of both the public and the journalists, but it is not impossible.

The license is also not meant to be a substitution for the law. While it is intended to complement the law, a licensing system remains strictly for the members of the industry as a way to raise the bar of ethical behaviour in light of the influence in society that journalists possess. Unlike the proposed license’s standards, media law (as the ad-hoc compilation of laws and regulations pertaining to the work of journalists is informally called) only sets out a minimum criterion of what is acceptable behaviour—behaviour to which the general public must adhere to as much

as the members of the media. In fact, since journalists already deal with restrictions based on the law, it is only a small step for them to accept an industry-wide code. If there are already limitations to the job, why condemn the formalization of them?

The broadcast media have long had to deal with other legal conditions. Since the 1932 *Broadcast Act* based on the recommendations from the Aird Commission that the airwaves be regarded as public property, TV and radio (which includes newscasts) have been regulated by the government in the public interest (Martin, p. 6, 1997). Today the CRTC has the authority to license broadcasters. It also has the power to suspend, renew or cancel those licenses, which affects broadcast news. By comparison, newspapers are unregulated, although not for lack of concern on the part of the government in the form of the Davey Report and the Kent Commission on newspapers. But just as the CRTC does not specifically control the content of broadcast news, neither would a licensing body for journalists. The system would not be put in place to dictate how a newspaper, TV or radio newscast should be set up. It would be there as a standard of morality, ethics and values required of media practitioners. How that is implemented is up to the individual media outlet.

It serves reminding what the laws covering media behaviour are as a way to illustrate how a system of licensing would be no more restrictive than the way in which most journalists already perform their jobs.

The follow list of media law topics uses 1997 *Media Law* book by Robert Martin as its source.

Criminal libel is meant to preserve public order by punishing certain forms of expression that are potentially harmful to public order. There are three subsets to it. The first one is seditious, which is traditionally used to prosecute unacceptable political speech. It is not meant as protection against unpleasant words, but rather truly harmful threats to peace. The next one is defamatory, defined as insults exchanged between two people. Similar to civil libel, “a defamatory libel prosecution is a public matter between the state and the accused. The Law Reform Commission of Canada...recommended that it be removed” (Martin, p. 57, 1997). The last subset of criminal libel is blasphemous, or extreme statements against the religious beliefs of individuals that can lead to a breakdown of public order. The Criminal Code, however, doesn’t define “blasphemy”.

Civil libel, on the other hand, is a private matter between two individuals if the allegedly harmful information is published to a third person. Within civil libel is defamation, subdivided into slander (words spoken from someone else but never recorded in any other form) and libel (written or printed words, including those on film, tape and computers).

The media are subject to publication bans by the courts and restrictions of cameras in the courtroom. The use of these laws is to weigh the rights of the accused to a fair trial with freedom of expression and openness of the courts. Other court-related laws pertaining to journalists include contempt of court. Vague and undefined, it can be regarded as the “interference with the due administration of justice. Its purpose is to ensure that the judicial system operates the way it is intended” (Martin, p. 75, 1997).

Within contempt of court laws lies *ex-facie*, meaning outside the courtroom. It includes everything from “scandalizing the court”—saying nasty things in public about judges, accusing judges of bias or taking bribes, publishing information while it is still protected by court order, identifying young offenders protected under law. The other part of contempt of court is *in-facie*, or inside the courtroom, where it is illegal to disobey a court order (for example, refusing to disclose the identity of a source when ordered by a judge to do so).

The laws in place are part of a working journalist’s vocabulary, as are most forms of ethical behaviour. The laws are written down, and require accountability. Ethical, moral behaviour does not, as of yet. The licensing system would formalize in writing the work journalists already perform on a daily basis.

It is not, in fact, a large stretch from journalism as it operates today to licensing. Ironically, the one institution representing the public, and all the country stands for, including freedom of expression, restricts journalists. Parliament Hill in Ottawa has exclusive membership to the Press Gallery. Unless an individual is a member, he or she cannot report on the government. As a non-profit organization of about 400 members, the group provides control, access to cover Question Period—the House of Commons debates—and media scrums, news conferences and visiting dignitaries. There is controversy over who is considered a journalist, but as the regulations stand now, a reporter must prove he or she is working full-time for a news outlet. Even freelance journalists are rarely admitted as full members. The Press Gallery does offer temporary memberships, if a journalist is visiting for a few months, or a student in on

a school placement. Contentious as their membership rules may be, the organization has found a way since Parliament opened in 1867 to dictate restrictions on journalists.

A system of registration would not even go so far in its limitations. Anyone who is able to pass the education and ethical standards would be licensed, and for the people who choose not to follow the professional route, the system will not forbid them from publishing. It is a compromise between freedom of expression and a method of increasing credibility in an industry whose main purpose is considered a public trust.

A brief look at other professions' mandates will demonstrate how a system of licensing is in fact in the public good.

The Law Society of Upper Canada

...exists to govern the legal profession in the public interest by ensuring that the people of Ontario are served by lawyers who meet high standards of learning, competence and professional conduct,, upholding the independence, integrity, and honour of the legal profession for the purpose of advancing the cause of justice and the law. [Its] mandate is to see that persons seeking admission to the legal profession were competent and to ensure lawyers followed proper procedures and behaved ethically (www.lsuc.on.ca).

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario's goals are to "promote high quality care by the physicians of Ontario, ensure a high standard of personal conduct by physicians, protect the public from any abuse in the doctor-patient relationship and encourage the active participation of the public with the medical profession in professional self-governance. This system of self-regulation is based on the premise

that the College must act first and foremost in the interest of the public”

(www.cpsso.on.ca).

The Professional Engineers of Ontario is mandated to ensure public safety.

...[P]rofessional engineers are sometimes called “guardians of public safety because they’re licensed to protect us. The license is a sign of a professional, trained to ensure that our buildings, roads, machine products and environment are safe. Like medical or legal professions, professional engineers are licensed and are accountable for their work. Professional engineers subscribe to a strict code of ethics and practice standards (www.peo.on.ca).

These three examples of self-governing regulatory bodies exist to protect the public, just as this paper is arguing a regulatory body for journalists should do. The concept of watching over the conduct of people in certain occupations is certainly not new. The Law Society of Upper Canada was formed in 1797 (hence the name “Upper Canada”, because it was created by an Act of Legislature of the Assembly before Canada was a country). It now has more than 27,000 members in the province. The doctors have been self-regulating since 1866, and the engineering association has more than 62,000 members.

Just as importantly as the function to license, these regulatory bodies also provide more services for their members, a mandate that would benefit journalists, as well.

The groups provide extra training, professional development, education programs, libraries, and advice. They monitor quality through peer assessments, and offer advice to various levels of government on issues relating to law, medicine or engineering.

Each profession has a different function and level of responsibility in society. Engineers and doctors must meet strict standards, or people will die. Lawyers, like

journalists, on the other hand, cannot kill people by incompetence. Instead, the lawyer is protecting the public's fundamental right to democracy and freedom of expression. The journalist, protecting the public's right to know and fully participate as an informed citizen in society, deserves the equal amount of respect he or she upholds. Professionalization—a system of licensing—can accomplish that.

The discussion of journalism's place in society is certainly not new, as Jerry Knudson points out.

"The debate over whether journalism is a profession or a craft and calling is older than any of us," writes Everette Dennis. This debate is the crux of the matter. The late James Reston, respected member of the *New York Times* had this to say on the question: "The doctor affects the physical well-being of his patients; the reporter affects the mental well-being of his reader...Like the doctor, he has the opportunity to poison them and the main difference, it seems to me, is merely that a reporter can poison more of them quicker than a doctor" (Knudson, p. 885, 1996).

There are some countries who have stopped debating and started licensing. It is, in fact, quite common in Latin America. Knudson's research revealed there were eight countries with the *colegios* system, which refers to a system where people who want to practice journalism in that country must have a university degree and belong to a *colegio*, or a professional organization. In 1993, there were thirteen countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Columbia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. Not all were active, but they existed nonetheless (Knudson, p. 878, 1996). Brazil, in fact, has been working under the *colegios* system for more than 30 years.

Knudson reports that professionalization is growing on all fronts. There were, at the time of his research, 60,000 journalists serving 420 million people, and in 1992, there were 250 journalism or communication programs at universities—up from 13 in 1950.

Proponents of the *colegios* system also argue there is no infringement on freedom of expression since columns of newspapers are still open to *colaboradores* (guest columnists and letter writers). [They] argue it raises the standards of journalism since each individual association has the means to enforce the mutually agreed upon codes of ethics or conduct (Knudson, p. 885, 1996).

While it's necessary to note that the countries in question have different economies, policies and culture than Canada, the licensing system is working well, in general. There are two exceptions. Both Dominican Republic and Costa Rica have declared *colegios* unconstitutional. The Dominican Republic now has a voluntary association, but Costa Rica has a complex legal story behind its decision to ban the licensing system.

An American reporter, Steven Schmidt, was living and working as a journalist there in the 1970s. But, in 1983, the *colegios* took legal action against him because they didn't recognize at the time his degree from a private university in San José. Schmidt won the case against him in the lower court, but the Costa Rican Supreme Court upheld the decision. The country, however, voluntarily submitted the matter to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a consultative body of the Organization of American States. It came to a split decision, but nonetheless upheld the *colegios*'s right to license journalists. But it also suggested that Costa Rica take

the case higher, to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In 1985, it ruled unanimously against licensing journalists in Costa Rica.

“There was another case in 1995 which ruled that the Costa Rican Constitution grants international treaties precedence over ordinary laws. The Supreme Court said: ‘This ruling does not judge or cover the legitimacy of the existence of the Costa Rican *Colegio de Periodistas* nor does it make reference to the profession of journalists’” (Knudson, p. 883, 1996).

The interpretation, therefore, is that although it is now illegal to license journalists in Costa Rica, there was little discussion as to the merit of it; rather it came down to a technicality.

If Canada were to implement a licensing system, careful research would have to be done to make sure the standards complied with any international treaty or human rights obligations the country has. That work, in itself, does not invalidate the concept that a system to license journalists would be in the best public interest.

Conclusion

As the thesis outlined, journalism is a public trust. Journalists should, therefore, be licensed because the public, which depends on the media for information to participate in democracy has the right to know and understand the moral values, context, education and bias of journalists. A license will give the public a standard by which to judge, evaluate and interpret the information they receive through the media and provide a path of redress should the public feel the media are not living up to the standards.

As it stands now, “[t]he media are a major influence in our nation and truly one of our most important societal institutions. Yet they operate free of many cross-checks and constraints that control other institutions, such as government or business” (Fink, p. xiv, 1995).

The standards of the system itself would reflect similar journalism ideology of accurate, fair, honest, independent and ethical reporting. The specifics must be left to further research because the amount of detail needed to provide an appropriate answer is not part of the scope of this thesis. It would be necessary to poll journalists, editors, publishers, advertisers, readers, government and businesses about their expectations, compare them to the codes of conduct already in place, examine them in relation to other countries with similar systems, ensure no rights or treaties are being violated, and discuss the results in an open forum before determining the

specific details. The information would most certainly be worth having, if the concept of licensing journalists is to create any political will at all.

Implementing such a licensing system must start with research. A detailed analysis of the codes of ethics already in place, including a comparison of their similarities and differences would be the first step to determining the standards and issues of concern as they now exist in the media. Learning more about the start of the *colegios* systems in Latin America would also better define the process through which a licensing system could be set up. For what reasons did they proceed with their professional association? What type of resistance did they encounter? How did they overcome it? How did the transition from an unlicensed system to a licensed one take place?

The information received from close research into existing systems can only go so far, however. Canada is a wide, regionally-diverse country that may have different needs or expectations of its journalists. A comparison of the existing codes (plus interviews with media personnel and readers about their expectations) to the information discovered by the Latin American research would reveal what, if any, differences there are in media practices. The research would therefore, have to closely examine the level at which the licensing system is put in place. If it were implemented federally, then the standards would be equal for the entire country, a benefit not only for journalists on assignment or who move, but also for readers who travel. But the regional differences are strong, and a better model might be to adopt the practices of

other registered professions, such as lawyers and engineers. Each province has their own body and rules to best reflect the needs of the local populations.

The standards themselves must address ethical issues of importance to readers and journalists. Common practices in some media, such as chequebook journalism, where a source is paid for information, or junkets—trips paid for by an outside organization looking for publicity in the form of news stories—would be disallowed. The perception by readers of the quality of journalism is at stake. Nothing must be done to allow even the perception that a newspaper is not independent and trustworthy.

The question of membership would not revolve around the type of newspaper, as is now the practice of provincial press councils. Individual journalists would be licensed, not the newspapers. The choice to hire an “R.J.” or an unregistered writer would be an independent decision made by each media outlet.

Education standards must also be drawn up, and developed in conjunction with universities and colleges. With journalism and communication programs already in place across the country, it may simply be a matter of accrediting the schools. A detailed survey of the content for each program would have to be completed first, though, to make sure that the institutions are offering similar training that would allow for registration upon graduation.

Here it would be beneficial to more closely examine existing education criteria for other professions. There are several different models available, such as found in law schools, for example, which usually require at least two years of an undergraduate education before admittance. Professional Engineers, on the other hand, go through an

accredited four-year university program, write an ethics exam and must practice as an Engineer-in-Training for two years before they can earn their designation.

The education standards for registered journalists must be phased in, otherwise veteran reporters with years worth of valuable experience could possibly be ineligible. Therefore, a grandfather clause would have to be drawn up as a way of evaluating those already entrenched in the current, unlicensed system.

The actual procedures for disciplining could be adapted from existing professional organizations. As opposed to accountability systems in place now in an unlicensed media environment, the licensing body would be responsible for deciding if disciplinary action is required, and if so, what punishment fits the “crime”. Actions such as fines, suspension, or termination of the license could be included as disciplinary measures.

The mechanics of implementation might be complex, but not impossible. With additional background research into existing systems of licensing—both foreign journalism licenses and domestic ones from other professions—a Canadian licensing system for journalists would be feasible.

But before any of that can happen, the concept must first be accepted. Fundamental, theoretical reasons describing the necessity and benefits of a licensing system are needed before an implementation strategy can be conceived. Without appreciating why such a system is necessary, a detailed blueprint would lose its purpose. The focus of this thesis, then, has been to argue for the purpose, the

concept, and the reasons why Canada should have a licensing system for journalists.

The “how” must follow with more research.

The media, as the paper has argued, has a large influence on the democratic process. They have the power to shape the way the public thinks about a issue, or views a certain event. Without the media, the information necessary for an individual to be a contributing member of society would be much more difficult to acquire. In fact, the effort may drive people from even attempting to cull through what they would need to know as effective citizens. The media, then, can play a vital role as gatekeeper *and* interpreter of the information flowing into society at a fast and furious pace. But the media still needs to tread carefully. In a digital age, where computers and technology dominate vocabulary, business space and personal lives, the media cannot forget their customers are human. In a global village, where McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” has become a rallying cry for communication, the media’s role is more apparent. But journalism is about communication of ideas among people, not solely about the transmission equipment. If the focus on people gets lost, society loses.

By formalizing a code of ethics to which all registered journalists must abide, the public guarantees the emphasis will stay with the readers, viewers and listeners. With a system of accountability and enforceability in place, the public has concrete proof that the media still serve its interests.

There is a high quality of journalism in this country. Canadian television news programs are highly regarded domestically and the industry enjoys a strong

international reputation for documentaries. While there is a concern about newspaper concentration and ownership, people are nevertheless reading papers. The *National Post* was created last September, illustrating at least some form of competition still exists. It is true there is a persuasive influence of corporate culture and policy on a paper, but regardless of the monopolies many dailies have in their towns—or maybe because of it—the public must trust their news sources as well as the news itself.

Newspapers are a business, but they have a unique place in society. They provide information to the public, which, in turn has been entrusted with the responsibility of civic duty. Information about the world, country and communities is essential for a continuing dialogue of voices that ideally makes up a democracy. If the public is asked to trust the media to sort through and provide them with what's important, should the readers not, at the very least, be aware of the standards by which they work? The press must consider its social responsibility as much as its bottom line. It has to be accountable for its actions and decisions. A self-regulating license system for journalists would achieve just such a goal without distracting it from its independence (since government intervention is not the answer). Freedom of expression, enshrined in the Canadian Constitution, is, of course, guaranteed. Therefore, let the newspapers allow access to everyone. Simply let the public know who are the people trained in the job of reporting for the public trust. It also does not hurt the bottom line.

“[W]e believe good journalism is good business. As an information company our success depends on the excellence, reputation and usefulness of that information which is our product. We want our readers and viewers to have the highest possible confidence in what we produce. This is essential to maintaining our credibility, and consequently, the loyalty and following

of our readers and viewers.” – Alvan H. Chapman Jr., then chairman of Knight-Ridder, Inc., in a letter to the author (Fink, p. 144, 1995).

The issue of credibility is an important one. It is at an all-time low. There is a perception among the public that the media is doing a shoddy, sensationalistic and shallow job of reporting. Whether those criticisms are justified or not is not the issue. The media has still had its image tarnished, and that will hurt circulation and viewership. Without trust, newspapers won't get readers and consequently, won't attract advertisers. Another point to credibility is quality. If a newspaper can be assured, through a licensing system, that their journalists are well-trained, well-educated and ethical, it would put itself into a better position of trust among its readers.

Education is an essential component to registering journalists. “Critical thinking is the engine that drives the moral reasoning machinery and thus leads us away from knee-jerk reactions and toward a more rational approach to decision-making...Critical thinking involves to some extent, learning to know when to question something and what sort of questions to ask” (Day, p. 60, 1997). Educational standards, then, help define for the public which journalists possess those critical thinking skills. By teaching journalists about the history and philosophy of ethics, different models of moral reasoning and how to apply ethics to the workplace, the reporters themselves have a stronger foundational base on which to write.

It doesn't help that today's society is relative. Words, pictures, sound are open to interpretation depending on the personal experiences, bias and background of each

individual. “The basic idea is that what constitute news and thus what is significantly true, is itself radically dependent on the media’s or the viewer’s world view and understanding. [It] amounts to the claim that all news is inherently subjective” (Kieran, p. 49, 1997). In such moral relativism, provisions are required. At least some “absolutes” are necessary to prevent relativism from sliding into nihilism. A standard for licensing, and a universal code of ethics would provide a baseline for the public and journalists alike. Context is required for today’s reality, so therefore, why not clarify a code of ethics, standards and a mechanism by which the public can either call the journalists for not living up to their truth, or dispute the truth as it is written?

Some would argue that professional occupations are licensed because of the technical requirements for the job. A doctor must know about the body and how to hold a scalpel before the first incision, and an engineer must know how to calculate the right formula for the right amount of concrete necessary to hold up a building. Then journalists, too, need to meet technical requirements: writing, researching, interviewing, or more technical skills such as digital editing, computer layout or camera work.

The professions, however, are more than a sum of their technical skills. They mandate their members to be ethical and of high quality. The public should require the same of its journalists by implementing a system of licensing. The journalism industry has changed over the centuries and decades to adapt with the times. Since this will continue to happen, it’s important to understand the standards from which the media draw on now, to better appreciate the changes ahead. Licensing is not

simply about punishing journalists who are proven to have done wrong. It's about common standards to which the public can look.

While the methods of accountability in the field today, such as letters to the editors, ombudsmen and press councils are necessary, they will not be effective unless the public knows their objectives will be upheld. Enforceability is a key factor to licensing. "Restrictions tend to make newsmen stifled, yet the contemporary cultural climate demands that journalism employ restraint and sobriety" (Christians et al., p. 28, 1995).

The public demands integrity, ethical behaviour and high standards from journalism. By licensing journalists, the questions of quality have a common answer in the common code. Journalism is a public trust, and by implementing a licensing system, both journalists and the public will no longer have to doubt that this is so.

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Please note:

This bibliography represents a wide range of subject matter that I investigated throughout the research of this paper. It is a reflection of the thought-patterns I considered before finally achieving the final product. Since the many tangents and incarnations of various draft forms all played a significant role in the evolution of the thesis, I felt it was beneficial to include a comprehensive, as opposed to selected, bibliographic list of sources.

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