Good or Bad for Whom and What: A Revised Ethical Framework to Differentiate Journalism and Activism

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Abstract:

This study proposes a revised theoretical framework that consists of the axes of ethical devotions (visibly at the personal, institutional, local, national, regional, and global levels) and ethical reasoning approaches (teleology and deontology), to analyze journalists' ethical stance of collecting and editing news. Values serving as the foundation of the deontological reasoning approach are deemed as heuristics evolved from historic teleological calculations. Journalism is defined as truthful informing of current events ethically devoted to a larger community, while activism, in this context, is defined as truthful informing devoted to a smaller one. So a global devotion with a teleological reasoning approach is recommended for journalists in this global age.

Keywords: ethical framework, ethical devotion, ethical reasoning approach, journalism, activism

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Introduction & Analysis:

Ethical practice is vital to journalism, not only because journalists need to maintain credibility to earn trust of their audiences but also because media coverage impacts the interests of multiple parties in the societies, including the media and journalists themselves (Entman, 1993; Patterson & Wilkson, 2004; Yao & Eigenmann, 2013).

In this globalizing age (Robertson, 1995), facilitated by advances of informational technology (Boudreau, Loch, Robey, & Straud, 1998), the volume of human mobilization, communication, interaction, and transaction has drastically increased, and people's thoughts and interests have been extended and complicated along the dimensions of both universalization and particularization. Discourses, conflicts, and protests, in real or virtual world, are inevitably prevailing everywhere, posing challenges for journalists to cover (McLeod, 2007). While media cannot avoid a stance to portray those issues due to the inevitability of news framing that generates cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences (Entman, 1993; Gans, 2005; Gitin, 2003; Tuchman, 1978), mainstream media have struggled to find a fair stance.

This study proposes an ethical framework, consisting of the axes of ethical devotions (visibly at the personal, institutional, local, national, regional, and global levels) and ethical reasoning approaches (teleology and deontology), to analyze journalists' ethical stance (Yao & Eigenmann, 2013). Values serving as the foundation of deontological reasoning are heuristics evolved from long-time teleological calculations in history, so teleology is more fundamental between the two approaches and can avoid value-based conflicts. Ethical devotion clarifies the relationship between journalism and activism, which has been complexed (Ruigrok, 2010) by the emergence of new media (Russell, 2016). Journalism is truthful informing with a larger ethical devotion, while activism, in this context, is truthful informing with a smaller one. So, covering a national issue with a national devotion can be journalism but with a local or institutional devotion may be seen as activism.

In this global age, journalists need to subscribe to a global devotion with a teleological reasoning approach, particularly when collecting or editing global news, or their work fall into a type of activism. Pure journalism is needed to enhance the credibility and accountability of this profession, which are already under severe attack (Pickard, 2016), and maintain the mediated platforms, or Habermas' "public sphere" (2006), for global discourses (Ruigrok, 2010).

Journalists' Ethical Framework:
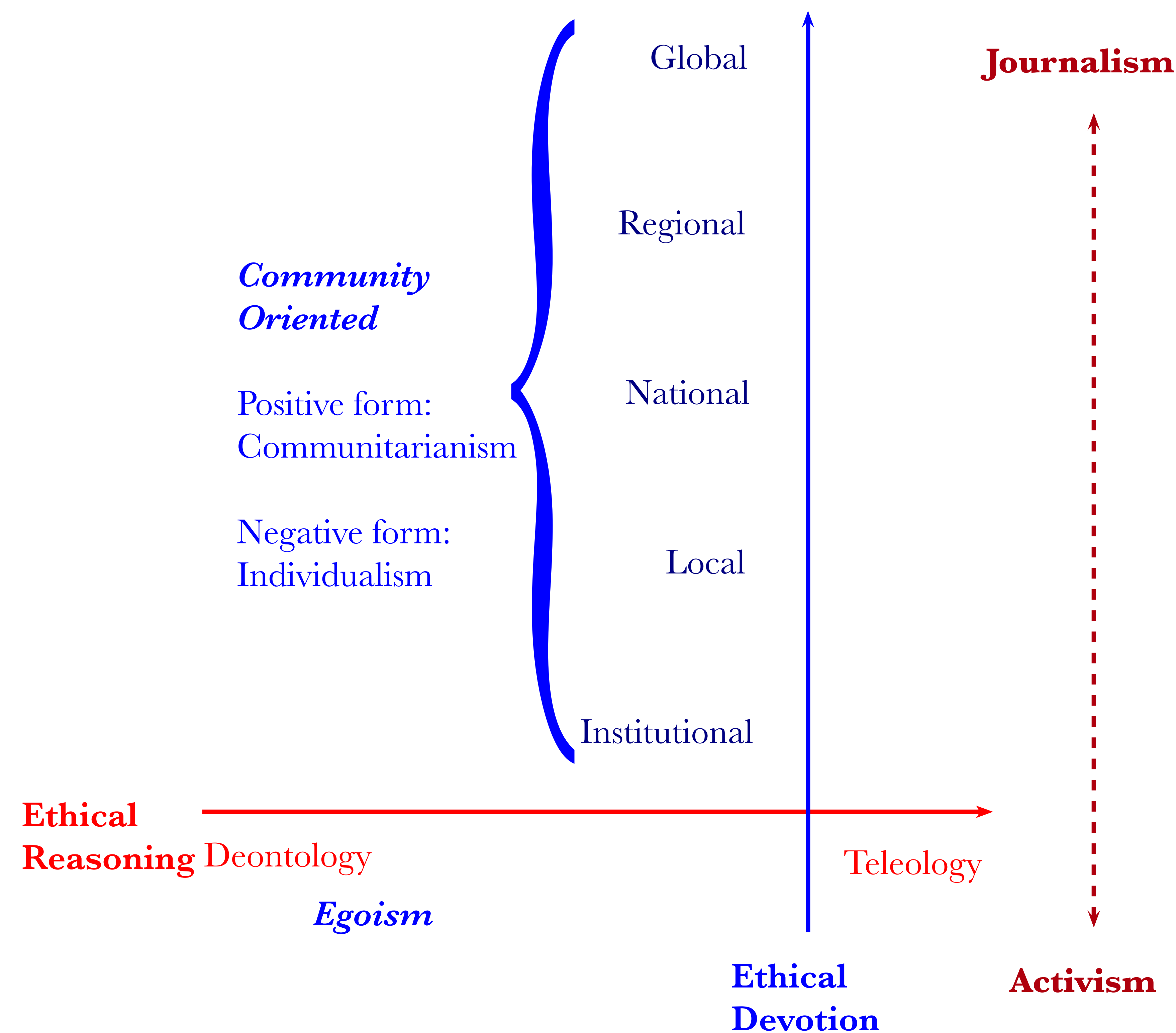
Conclusions:

• Journalists' ethical stance can be analyzed with their ethical devotions and ethical reasoning approaches.

• Ethical devotions can be egoism (loyal to oneself) or community oriented (positive form: communitarianism; negative form: individualism). The communities range from an institution to the world. Individualism is considered community oriented because all individual rights are held for all community members equally.

• While both are truthful informing, the larger the ethical devotion, the more journalistic; the smaller the devotion, the more activist. Covering an issue involving all members of a society with an ethical devotion to the society is journalism, but covering that issue with an ethical devotion to a part of the members is activism.

• Ethical reasoning can be conducted in an approach of deontology or teleology. In the deontological approach, journalists make decisions based on certain values and duties; in the teleological approach, journalists make decisions by considering all interests involved to maximize them overall. The values and duties that serve as the foundation of deontological reasoning, however, are actually heuristics evolved from people's historic long-time teleological calculations. Their cross-cultural differences can create conflicts, essentially or non-essentially.

• So, in this global age, a global ethical devotion with a teleological reasoning approach is recommended for journalists to enhance their credibility and build engaging global media platforms. When pure journalism seems beyond reach, activism for interests representing the global future is journalists' best choice.

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