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Deontology of Journalism as a Field of Moral Choice for a Professional

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The author examines the concept and the content of the journalism deontology in comparison with professional ethics and morality. According to his estimation, deontology is a field of the principles of profession, on the basis of synthesis of which the mission appears. One of the main qualitative characteristics of deontology consists in the fact that it joins the knowledge of objective laws and the subjective position of the media professional that forces him to make a moral choice.

Keywords: deontology, journalism, mission, principle, moral choice.

Problem viewpoint

One of the central places in the media theory belongs to *deontological bases of journalism*. They are in close interrelations with the laws of press. Interrelations, however, is not equivalent to direct subordination. Both one and another contain a powerful potential to regulate processes in journalism from the side of society and its agents, as well as the self-regulation processes developing inside journalism. Our aim is to characterize deontology as a phenomenon that plays a special and essential part in the theory and (especially) practices of journalism.

Today there is no necessity to argue an importance of the deontology study. It is even officially recognized as an obligatory element of qualification of a mass media employee. In particular, one of the State Educational Standards of the “Journalism” speciality, in the section of general professional disciplines, mentions it in

such formulations: “Journalistic deontology” and “Economic, legal, deontological nature of collisions and searching ways to settle them”. At the same time, as it seems, the role and the place of deontology in the journalism theory are determined not precisely enough. At least it did not get the standard description as an object of research (one of the largest and “influential” objects) that determines the matter and concepts of other categories. The main reason is that deontology as a separate area of scientific knowledge is young; it only tries to comprehend itself though, paradoxically, its historical roots are deep and strong. The told should be related to many disciplines that include deontology into own structure as a subdivision or a corner of sight on the basic object. Usually in a number of such disciplines medicine, jurisprudence, pedagogy, and other spheres of practical and scientific activity are mentioned, because they conduct

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highly close contacts with needs of the society and a person. Undoubtedly, journalism, as practices and a field of knowledge, also belongs to the spheres with social-humanitarian dominants. And the situation of deontological disorder has a high actuality for it.

This picture is in detail reflected in special research publications: somebody relates deontology to ethics, law, or certain intermediate zone between them (*Prohorov*, 2001, p. 214–215). According to our observations, gravitation towards ethics is particularly typical, especially to the most formalized and instrumental part of it. Such a position is characteristic not only for the Russian authors, but also for representatives of the international scientific community. For example, the report materials made by foreign consultants for the Council of Europe and placed on a site of the Union of Journalists of Russia (1995), are entitled as the “Rules of Self-regulation in the Field of Deontology of Press”. The report gives the comparative analysis of ethical codes and practices of the press councils in the countries of the European Union. According to a subject of analysis the norms and measures directed to optimisation of activity of media organizations and their employees are considered here (Council of Europe, 1995). It is noticeable that some of the codes are named as deontological. In rather more developed scientific systems (for example in medicine) the illegitimacy of such identification is emphasized. If to accept joining to ethics as a general rule (as well as identification with other regulative systems in journalism) there would not be a necessity to separate deontology as a special subject for study. Against this objection some authors offered the idea to consider deontology as an “ex-territorial” formation that incorporates all kinds of regulations. The following definitions were proposed, in particular: “A set of legal and ethical standards of responsible behaviour of mass media employees” (*Lozovskii*, 2007, p. 56), “A

set of duties ‘serving’ journalistic obligations and norms of their carrying out without dependence on their comprehension, as a certain system of categorical imperatives of the journalistic behaviour set by the nature of mass media operating in this or that situation” (*Prokhorov*, 2001, p. 232), and others.

In our opinion, the way of summation causes extensive effects, but it does not lead to understanding of a qualitative originality of deontology, as well as it does not open an opportunity to consider deontology in a context of intrinsic characteristics of journalism. The list of obligations of the press is endless; the enumeration of them will take a lot of time and efforts and, most likely, from the theoretic-methodical point of view it would look like no more than a primitive description. Besides the quoted definitions concentrate attention on a normative aspect of the question, and in this respect they are similar to the position of the European experts presented above. Such deontology hardly has chances to stand at the same level with fundamental categories of journalism – it will inevitably realize itself as a collection of rules and interdictions, more or less widely spread in a profession and more or less obligatory. If it is deontology indeed, it is lowered to a utilitarian-pragmatic level. At last, if to agree that imperatives are predetermined by the nature of mass media (perhaps, in this case it would be more correct to refer to the nature of journalism) they should operate objectively, as a direct continuation of the laws of the press. This means that a set of duties and norms operates without dependence on their comprehension by media professionals – that is, objectively, without journalist’s will and feelings.

We would not like to reduce our reflections to criticism of definitions and interpretation proposed by other authors. Without any doubt, the works of authoritative scientists contain a good deal of truth and benefits for the development of

science. The object of research is so whimsical, that it does not allow finding room for it entirely in this or that system of analysis. At the same time deontology should not stay on secondary positions in the theory of journalism. It is able to give researchers a key to answer radical questions that can hardly be settled in other coordinates or have no solutions at all.

Discussion on the matter of subject

In a deontological prospect the approaches to the ideal in journalism are being opened – we mean the constructing of such model of practice that harmonizes public expectations, natural properties of the press, subjective aspirations of its leaders and employees, and also results of studying it in science. However, for this purpose it is necessary to deal with lexical and semantic distinctions between basic concepts that are chosen by the will of this or that author. The normative treatment of deontology operates with a concept of the duty. In our version the key concept is *the due*. The difference, on fluent impression, can seem insignificant, but we think it to be a basic one. In the first case the emphasis is done on obligations of the press, in the second case – on the necessary and true behaviour, without which the life will lose its natural order and vector of development. If so, deontology becomes an area where the ideal is being formed on the basis of laws one has got to know. Thus, the priority of objective nature (the laws) is kept in its relation to subjective knowledge produced by experience and consciousness. But the consciousness also plays an active part, it lives in a continuous search of the best choice in the whole volume of knowledge; it correlates the laws with each other, operating in the light of the laws content, but not under their dictatorship. I. Kant specified the activity of consciousness in its relation to the objective nature and also the practicality of an ideal when he described the moral world – the world that

conforms to all moral laws. The moral world, according to the philosopher, is thought only as comprehensible through the intellect. Hence, in this sense it is only an idea, however a practical idea that really can and should have influence on the sensual world to make it, whenever possible, adequate to the idea (Kant, 1999, p. 596).

The due in journalism, as well as in a social-moral choice in general, is a necessity understood and accepted by people and included by them into personal world outlook and own strategy of behaviour. Such statement of a question induces to include into analysis a corresponding “measuring instrument” and representation on the due, which would give a possibility to make reflections at a level of moral foundations of journalism. The category of a principle corresponds to the given task in full. In lexicographical dimension the principle is understood as a general idea of the certain theory, then as belief and views, and then as a main feature of any system. Each of these meanings will find its place in the description of deontology performing corresponding representations on the due. Deontology is a conceptual reconstruction of journalism built on different theoretical bases. It is also an integral characteristic of professional consciousness and behaviour in journalism. It is, at last, a “mechanism” of press’s vital activity that ascends finally to its objective laws. Researchers of the journalistic ethics (which consists in direct relationship with deontology, as it was told before) formulate some principles, though the list of them differs in domestic and foreign sources (Lazutina, 2006; Lambeth, 1992). The word “principle” is included in ethical codes of press in Austria, Belgium, Germany, while in Greece the code has a name “Principles of Deontology” (Kazakov, 1999).

Certainly, it is necessary to use actively all this rich theoretical experience. But there is one fundamental condition: we have to draw a differentiating line between ethics and

deontology. After that some of ideas offered by experts in “a ready-made” form will pass to the category of deontological principles. Maybe, after this operation the independent category of principles of ethics will be kept, but also another way is possible: deontology becomes an area of principles, on which the “building” of ethical standards and rules should be constructed. We consider the second variant more proved and more probable. At least, inclusion of principles in research works on ethics cannot be a mechanical operation; it demands a fundamental methodological substantiation. Meanwhile it occurs not in each case. For example, in a methodical publication for students devoted to professional journalist’s ethics in the USA the following principles are performed as independent themes: freedom of speech, truthfulness, justice and humanity (Kumylganova, 2003). Indeed, in itself they cannot cause objections, they are valuable and noble by origin; this list coincides with a complex of principles proposed by the American expert Edmund B. Lambeth – the author of a monograph that is well known in Russian thanks to the translated publication. However, the authoritative scientist’s position is not a sufficient methodological basis for the solution of a complicated theoretical problem. There should be something more general, which lies under concrete formulations – the substance, from which principles arise, these ones, but not others.

The investigations in the field of moral dimension of professionalism can give answers to so difficult and important questions. For a few years the Tyumen Applied Ethics Research Institute (earlier – Centre) has been working in this direction especially actively. A long cycle of research projects became the appreciable phenomenon in profession studies. Special attention was paid to such spheres of practices, in which the intention of social and humanitarian

responsibility is seen extremely clear: education, management, science, etc. In this group the journalism also has its place, and special project has been aimed at moral-ethical studying of the press. The examination with a participation of a large group of experts has shown that “journalists, irrespectively to a divergence in attitudes, consider both possible and necessary to consider a choice of a profession in categories of a moral choice, according to them this component of the profession is its world outlook bases ... namely a problem of a moral choice” (Bakshtanovskii and Sogomonov, 2002, p. 208). The organizers of the project make common cause with the given conclusion, moreover, it completely corresponds to their concept of moral-ethical understanding of the profession, which goes back to the ideas of M. Weber and other outstanding sociologists and philosophers of ethics. For our research such generalization is extremely significant. It enables in reflections on the journalism deontology to come out of the territory of the press and to see journalism in a light of general category of so-called high professions, but not only in limits of corporation norms. In high professions the idea of devotion is accented which overcomes positions of pragmatic functionality and adaptability to the production needs.

For this reason the course of Tyumen authors’ reflections about high professions as a whole is interesting for us. We shall reproduce it in the form of a logic dotted line. The complete construction of ethics consists of several floors, in the process of lowering of their “height”: fundamental, applied, professional. The last is divided into the practical and sense-valuable branches. Our idea of the due can be located only in the second zone, for the due is a concentrate of a sense and necessities in journalism, the existence of “justification” in the world, and this thesis does not demand the proof. On a practical level there will be representations on norms

concerning labour technique and methods that are empirical manifestations of journalism. In our opinion, here the distinctions between the concepts oppositional to each other are clearly seen – the concept of a “profession”, on the one hand, and concepts of “occupation”, “labour activity”, “a source of means for subsistence”, on the other hand. The quoted authors insist that the concept of a profession by all means includes its moral dimension, assumes presence of such attributes, as an idea of predestination and devotion, altruistic motivations, and self-control. Moreover, “while practically all kinds of human activity are adjusted by a certain moral... the profession norms are also characterized by a mission” (Bakshantovskii and Sogomonov, 2005, p. 14, 52–53).

The keyword is found. Mission, predestination is a central category of deontology and the result of a conscious choice among many variants. *Mission as the formulated due*. If a mission is not revealed in the journalism theory (and then in practice) deontology will develop as mechanical coupling of every possible rules and restrictions. If it is clearly designated and recognized in a community it is possible to speak about a consensus concerning the due. Then there appears the outlook platform for a development of principles, their carrying out during life, control of execution of them, etc. In a word, deontology becomes a systematised formation that is wholly addressed to a daily practice of the press and its relations with a society and a person. It is necessary to emphasize that in gravitating to a practice the qualitative originality of deontology as the aspect of journalism theory is concluded. It bears not only the reflection of the necessary behaviour from the ideological point of view, but also an image of real, achievable, concrete labour behaviour. We have a right to suppose, though with some exaggeration, that harmoniously developed deontology produces

models of industrial practice of the press and all mass media system.

In this context there are additional possibilities to reject reproaches of those who are not agree to relate journalism to high profession because such evaluation, in their opinion, stands too far from current editorial activity. Really, on a concrete workplace the pathos declarations look strange and inappropriate, and hardly all the ordinary employees of mass media are able distinctly formulate own professional-outlook attitudes. However this or that coordinated representation on predestination and purposes of editorial work, undoubtedly, exists. It will be caught in an atmosphere reigning in a pressmen body, judgements regarding values of performed work, a choice of authoritative figures and leaders, and so forth. Moreover, in the journalist’s biography there are such moments of truth when they feel the necessity to express verbally own understanding of a sense of the professional life and to describe the object of devotion.

For the lack of mature deontological bases the ambiguous situations arise, up to funny things. So, one of the journalism departments in Russia has chosen the following words as its own slogan: “Journalism department is a territory of success”. Meanwhile the success obviously resists the mission, and consequently – professionalism. As researchers write: “the practice of realization of the idea of success ... gives enough ground for a conclusion that in a modern society the cult of success quite often leads to the replacement of moral reference points and consequently causes the sensation of own moral inadequacy” (Bakshantovskii and Sogomonov, 2005, p. 137). The told, certainly, does not mean denying value of career, achievements, and deserved compensation – it is a question on a cult of mercantilism. The expert from the USA in his own way describes the conflict between a mission and a professional egoism with its hopes on success.

Generalizing conclusions of other American scientists about typical lacks of the press, he concludes that instead of first of all being guided by the ideals of public service, mass media set such working purposes and create such procedures that first of all serve material and economic needs of the new organization (Lambeth, 1998, p. 22). As though catching up this thesis, the Russian authors write on prevalence of a prosperity cult in the Western professional corporation “with the only one purpose – the winner managed everything, and success should be above all. For the last fifteen years a similar moral climate has begun to be cultivated in the Russian press too”. (Kirichek and Fedotova, 2004, p. 16–17)

Meanwhile statements of those experts who correlate the activity with mission and devotion, sound not exotically. At a seminar devoted to becoming of the public TV in Russia, the executive director of the AETN-PBC public TV (Arkansas, USA) Susan Howarth described a qualification of her company employees. Usually they are people with the ideals wishing to change a situation, people who work not for the money, but, more likely, for the mission. You will not earn greater money at public TV in the USA, indeed, and there are problems how to enlist talents. But if to speak on the satisfaction which high-quality programs give to you – such choice differs from a choice that is done usually by commercial broadcasters (Public TV, 2000, p. 110). The editor-in-chief of the Russian professional magazine adds to the analysis of the mission one more aspect – the pragmatic one. “The nostalgia on Quixote” – so he names the article, in which he writes: “To revive in the guild the ethos of public service is necessary for our own survival. If we shall not help citizens they will cease to trust us, and the journalism will be lost as a profession” (Avraamov, 2007, p. 1). The given judgements do not contradict deontological codes accepted by journalistic

communities in the world and in the separate countries at all.

It would seem the problem is solved in the basis. It is only necessary to name the mission by precise words and then build related conclusions. However there is a powerful factor of the subjectivity in choice that is being done in the deontology field. The mission is not born simultaneously with the press, it is always variable – both in relation to journalism as a whole and in a case of individual behaviour. It means there is always a ground for disagreement and a competition of views, and not only in the theory, but also in a process of realization of the chosen moral orientations. It is necessary to recognize that the successful practical realization of the program idea becomes a strong argument in its protection even if this choice is incorrect from the scientific point of view or it may be suitable only for a local tactical situation. What eternal truths were opened by theorists, on a close distance the tactical triumph is better visible to the contemporary, instead of the future strategic defeat. Therefore the “correct” mission quite often turns into personal losses for its adherents. And therefore simultaneously there are at once a few versions of a true journalism, more or less distinctly articulated.

Unfortunately, we hardly can find needed materials in the specialized theoretical-journalistic literature about a competition of missions, anyway – under the name of this theme. Latently it is present in the analysis of the press social responsibility, role of mass media in the democracy process, moral standards of its employees and so on. Some of such works may be used as initial points for further movement to our aims. But one should remember that every version of mission is an ideal model, but not a concrete form of its embodiment. Actually it is impossible to isolate this or that model in its pure state, and it is necessary to deal with different

combinations and noises. Figuratively speaking, practice provides the researcher with “ore”, from which he has to extract certain “metal” by means of analysis. But developing of the ore lies in the competence of science specifying how to deliver it from collateral inclusions and also sorting “metals” on a degree of their value.

Value of mission is determined by two main criteria –its conformity to the objective press laws and suitability, utility of realization in the given society. Strictly speaking, the second condition “is located” in the first one, as conformity to society and press paradigms in itself is the law. However it is important to see more clearly a social situation, in which the deontological choice is being done. For this area of thinking the concrete historical determinations of principles, norms and standards have an especially essential value. The mission of the press should be sufficiently corrected depending on whether we relate it to the feudal-monarchist system or to socialistic one, to stable Western democracy with its values of Protestantism or to the modern Russian space.

In this connection let us listen to the European experts who actively revise so-called classic Western press theories in a view of the social and cultural diversity. They offer several groups of additional theories. “Crucial to these projects is their resistance against a too absolute interpretation of the principle of neutrality. In the tradition of development and emancipatory journalism – which should mainly be situated in developing countries – it is explicitly stated that neutrality does not apply when universalized... values such as peace, democracy, human rights, equality... progress... and national liberation, are at stake... And quite similarly vice versa... the US-based public journalism tradition pleads for reviving the public debate and for centralizing democracy as a universalized value. At the same time, advocates of public journalism plead for a

tighter link between community and journalism – the so-called ‘community connectedness’” (Carpentier, 2007, pp. 159-160).

In this case it is better to refrain from universal recommendations and to turn to individual-concrete object – to this country at the present stage of its history. Then it becomes visible that economic, political, socio-cultural multiformity and “intermediate” condition of the society, in comparison with its classical types, prevent from forming a clear social demand for the mission of journalism. In this sense, most likely, Russia still should live without reliable bases for the consent in discussions about press destination long enough. That’s why we offer our own hypothetical approach to the solution.

In the article many times we referred to a society and human values that determine a vector and a spirit of the journalism activities. According to a strong scientific tradition, the mission that brings prosperity to a society and a person is designated as social-humanistic strategy with a great variety of semantic shades of this name. *Social-humanistic destination* of the press becomes a ground, on which deontological principles are being formed. We are not eager to deny those complexes of principles that are proposed in numerous sources, including the international and national ethical codes. On the contrary, the diversity stimulates to search delicate nuances of complex questions. At the same time it is necessary to agree on a minimum of the central and most capacious ideas. They as though develop the social-humanistic mission and make it a multidimensional factor of the moral existence of a society and a profession. Reasonable reduction of a principles number is also necessary to avoid duplication with concepts, which necessarily exist in others categorical fields – for example in a system of laws.

Analytic conclusions.

Principles

Generalizing the above-said we shall name the following principles of journalism. First, a sociality. Today there is a scientific-theoretical base to use this concept as a terminologically exact one. In the special research devoted to this subject the sociality of a journalism idea relates to the “origin and functioning of the press, its organization, transforming influence, structure of journalists’ consciousness and culture, reflection in press of original social reality and all circles of participants in social practice... The sociality determines a theoretical-methodological validity of journalistic texts”. (Malugina, 2006, p. 13) This is a concept with an extensive content; a sociality is being modified and concretised in dependence on circumstances of the press existence and comprehension of it. In particular, it can be raised up to a degree of national character and patriotism.

Secondly, humanism as the next component of the mission’s name. Let us use the citation from a source, in which general prospects of the Russian press are considered; even more – an attempt of modelling of humanised journalism is undertaken. So: “gradually more and more journalists will understand that a starting point, Alpha and Omega of being is not a system, not an organization, but an alive, real person. All the rest: classes, collectives, organizations, groups are the modi of his existence. ... The understanding will gradually come that is necessary to regard the reader, the spectator, the listener not as a recipient or as an object of management, manipulation, education, but as an alive, doubting certain person who looks for effective ways to organize his own life. Such an approach gives an opportunity of the genuine dialogue directed on a collective search of the answer to a question: ‘How to live?’” (Dzyaloshinskii, 1999, p. 122).

Thirdly, a truthfulness. The word has a lot of senses, each of which demands special explanations. In Russian the word “truth” (правда) causes a lot of associations of different kinds; it has some sacral meanings that hardly can be transferred into other languages. Let’s open, for example, Russian defining dictionaries: true in practice, true in image, in blessing; justice, fairness; honesty, incorruptibility, conscience; innocence, etc. An accuracy is not mentioned here because it reflects the most simple and formal requirement to the journalist. The truth lies much deeper under a surface of the information data; it is implanted into the essence of phenomena and processes. In contemporary community there is a strong demand in real, deep truth instead of all kinds of imitations. The Austrian authors write in this connection: “The style of communication we find in all matters today is based on what a comedian Stephen Colbert famously termed ‘truthiness’, a term reminiscent of what Harry Frankfurt calls bullshit: ‘The essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*’ ... Similarly, truthiness is defined as ‘truth that comes from the gut, not books’ ... and ‘the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true’” (Schwarz and Hug, 2012, p. 272). Truthfulness in a subjective sense is an internal aspiration to a true understanding of the world of life and inability to renounce the extracted knowledge in favour of any benefits. In the given value it is highly close to such moral qualities as honesty and conscience.

From another side, in this line of thinking there is no place for objectivity that represents an unattainable ideal in studying and reflecting the reality. Perhaps, the term “objectivity” mostly corresponds with scientific investigations. Then it leaves a sphere of moral and, hence, a set of deontological categories. This distinction is subtly noticed in publications dealing with the

journalism attitudes to the reality. “The truth as a moral category is more important than the abstract true as a category of knowledge. The true that is not connected with the good and justice, is not being regarded as the truth”. And further: “Meanwhile the Truth – the true in its journalistic manifestation – is not a collection of information on the world; it is a disclosing of representation about the world” (Mansurova, 2002, p. 146, 147).

Thus, deontology can and, in our opinion, should be developed as a complex of ideas with its own internal hierarchy and in the close union with other directions of research thinking. Without taking into account deontological principles the journalistic science will appear in the impoverished form. First of all it concerns the moral-outlook parties of the theory.

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Деонтология журналистики как область морального выбора профессионала

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Автор рассматривает понятие и содержание деонтологии журналистики в сравнении с профессиональной этикой и моралью. По его оценке, деонтология является областью принципов профессии, на основе синтеза которых возникает миссия. Одна из главных качественных характеристик деонтологии заключается в том, что в ней соединяются знание объективных законов и субъективная позиция профессионала медиа, которая обязывает его к моральному выбору.

Ключевые слова: деонтология, журналистика, миссия, принцип, моральный выбор.
