


The Intersection of Ethics, Government and the Media

 Image of Diagram.

Introduction

The relationship between government and the media is complex and fraught with the temptation to put self interest before public interest. Various agendas and motivations often mix uncomfortably with expectations for accountability and responsibility. To win the public trust, government and the media need both engage in ethical behavior. Explore this diagram to learn more about the intersection of ethics, government and the media.

Ethics

- The principles of fairness, honesty, objectivity and presentation of all sides of an issue are ethical considerations at the intersection of ethics, government and the media.
- Specific principles of absolutism vs. relativism apply to ethics in this context.
- Ethics here is applied as learning the truth and explaining the truth as the central issue.
- Ethics also relates to rights of privacy and the public's right to know what its government and its elected, appointed and employed officials are doing.

Government

- The public's right to know vs. the individual's right to privacy fuels a debate about how much public servants can and should explain about their views and actions.
- By virtue of their position, public servants and most particularly elected officials should expect that the media will want to approach them to learn more about their viewpoints on the issues.
- Public servants are also known to use publicity to further their motives and perspectives.
- Some things that the government does not want the public to know can only come to light through thorough investigative journalism.

The Media

- The media consists of three potential groups—print media that includes newspapers, magazines, and other written sources, and electronic media such as television, radio, and Internet-based media.
- The term *media-driven* describes those situations where media interest in an issue actually keeps an event alive long after it would have naturally fallen out of the public's realm of interest.
- The public's perception of an event can be directed by the media through the selection of what is aired or written about and how widely it is distributed.
- How journalists gather information and what they distribute is often the reason that they are not held in high public esteem, with the emphasis being on selling stories and pictures rather than understanding about the truth.

Intersection of Ethics and Government

- The government should be truthful with the public about its actions. [Example: Cuban Missile Crisis]
- Public servants should also be truthful with the public about their perspectives and the potential impacts this can have on their actions. [Example: Hearings for Supreme Court nominations]
- Sometimes public servants take actions that can embarrass their position or ranking in government. [Example: The President Clinton/Monica Lewinsky affair]
- Public servants can use their position to convey support or inspiration for ethical positions. [Example: Senator Ted Kennedy's long-term efforts on healthcare reform]

Intersection of Government and The Media

- The government and the media do not always see eye-to-eye on the appropriateness of actions, and media intervention can change government actions. [Example: Attempt to deport Elian Gonzales]
- Attention from the media can change policy and law when the issue then resonates with the public. [Example: The Terri Schiavo case]
- Government officials can use the media to sway public opinion. [Example: War with Iraq]
- Media celebrities can use their notoriety to attempt to sway public opinion. [Example: Rush Limbaugh]

Intersection of The Media and Ethics

- The media can become the news when it oversteps its boundaries. [Example: The death of Princess Diana]
- Understanding where to draw the line and what boundaries cannot be crossed are foundations to ethical journalism. [Example: Use of pictures of returning dead from Afghanistan and Iraq]
- Knowing when to leave public servants alone in fragile human situations is an indication of good ethical boundaries. [Example: Interviewing rescue workers in New York right after 9/11]
- The media needs to avoid making the news through over-intensive and concentrated reporting. [Example: Financial crash played in a 24/7 continuous loop]

Intersection of Ethics, Government and The Media

- Government and its officials and the media should consider news value from a basis of ethical reasoning.
- This includes the Golden Rule (treat others as you would like to be treated), accuracy, honesty, and objectivity.
- Concerns and impacts providing equity for a diverse, multicultural community need to be taken into account.
- Truth should be the foundation of all news stories (the facts, not fiction provided for publicity) and all reporting (using the right words and placing things in the right context).

Conclusion

- Both government and the media have been guilty of distorting the story.
- There are also many examples of good newsworthy facts being shared with the public and with good reporting of those stories.
- Consider examples that may not be as obvious as those cited in this piece.
- Consider aspects of integrity, censorship, cover-ups and corrective actions that arise from the example.
- Analyze the issues that arise from both perspectives, that of news providers and that of news reporters.
- Remember that we can learn from both good examples and poor ones!