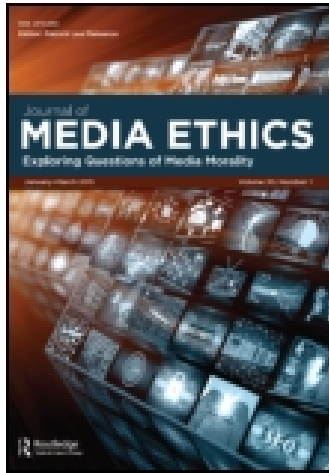


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## African Ethics and Journalism Ethics: News and Opinion in Light of Ubuntu

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# African Ethics and Journalism Ethics: News and Opinion in Light of *Ubuntu*

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In this article, I address some central issues in journalism ethics from a fresh perspective, namely, one that is theoretical and informed by values salient in sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on a foundational moral theory with an African pedigree, which is intended to rival Western theories such as Kantianism and utilitarianism, I provide a unified account of an array of duties of various agents with respect to the news/opinion media. I maintain that the ability of the African moral theory to plausibly account for issues such as proper content, investigative ethics, and freedom of speech means that it should be taken seriously by media ethicists and merits being paired up against competing approaches in future work.

## GROUNDING JOURNALISM ETHICS ON A PRINCIPLE OF COMMUNITY

What does a sub-Saharan ethic focused on the good of community, interpreted philosophically as a moral theory, entail for the duties of various agents with respect to the news/opinion media? The field is largely unaware of an answer to this question. However, it should be of interest.

For one, it would be intellectually appealing to have a unified account of the moral obligations of the state, reporters, editors and media house owners, all grounded on a single principle.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach would complement the largely piecemeal one that characterizes many edited textbooks (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel, & Woods, 2011; Gordon, Kittross, Merrill, Babcock, & Dorsher, 2011; Alexander & Hanson, 2012; Patterson & Wilkins, 2013), even those composed by a single author (e.g., Day, 2005; Ess, 2013). Note that some principles called “normative theories” in the field are not attempts to ground all duties relating to news/opinion media on a basic principle of what makes actions right in general, which is my project here.<sup>2</sup>

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For another, the sort of basic principle I articulate is novel, informed by underexplored, characteristically African ideas about morality that differ in important ways from approaches such as libertarianism, Kantianism, utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue ethics that dominate media ethical discussion in the English-speaking world (e.g., Day, 2005, pt. 1; Plaisance, 2009).<sup>3</sup> They also differ from Islamic ideals and East Asian ones such as Confucianism, with which Western media scholars and students have begun to acquaint themselves.

There are some discussions of journalism ethics in light of characteristically sub-Saharan values, but they tend not to be principled and comprehensive. In addition, they generally interpret African ethics in ways that differ from the way I do. For instance, they do not give much weight to individual privacy (Ess, 2013, p. 53), rights (Blankenberg, 1999, pp. 46–47; Tomaselli, 2011), or judgment (Blankenberg, 1999; Wasserman & de Beer, 2005, p. 202), or they are based on highly contested supernatural claims about the existence of ancestors and other spirits (Kasoma, 1996).

Although the moral theory developed and applied here is largely *from* Africa, viz., grounded on relational or communal values that are *more* prominent in sub-Saharan belief systems than at least those in the Europe, North America and Australasia,<sup>4</sup> it does not follow that it is only *for* those below the Sahara desert. In fact, I contend that the theory straightforwardly entails and plausibly explains many judgments about journalism ethics shared by Western readers, although there is not the space in this article to contend that it does so better than competing theories.

I discuss media ethical issues only insofar as they concern cognitive matters such as conveying descriptive information about what has happened and expressing opinions about the normative judgments readers should form. This means that I set aside some classic issues with respect to noncognitive aims on the part of the media, such as trying to please people (entertainment) or to get them to make a purchase (advertising), which do not focus on belief formation. And while my aim is to be fairly comprehensive about duties with regard to news and opinion, one obviously cannot address literally every issue in an article. This essay focuses on central matters such as when criticism of individuals is justified, which content is relevant, how journalists should acquire news content, why freedom of speech is justified, and when freedom of speech may rightly be curtailed.

The article begins by spelling out a principle that makes sense of characteristically sub-Saharan ideas about morality and is *prima facie* attractive as a philosophical ethic. Tersely stated, this principle instructs agents to prize communal relationships, ones of identity and solidarity. I contrast it with theories with which readers will be more familiar, including Western communitarianism, and provide some reason to take it seriously as a competitor to them, before applying it to ethical issues regarding news/opinion. The next section addresses some duties of the press with regard to the state and the public, and the one following takes up some duties of the state with regard to the press, both occasionally using examples from South Africa to illustrate. The article concludes by looking forward to the respects in which the African moral theory might be fruitfully applied to additional topics in media ethics.

### AFRICAN ETHICS AS A MORAL THEORY

There is a maxim that Africans often invoke to sum up salient sub-Saharan ethical perspectives, namely, “a person is a person through other persons” (e.g., Tutu, 1999, p. 35; Dandala, 2009,

p. 160).<sup>5</sup> Although those familiar with African cultures tend to associate certain ideas with this phrase, in plain English it means virtually nothing to someone outside the fold (after all, whoever thought that a person is not a person?). Since this article is pitched to an English-speaking audience that transcends those who know Africa, and since transparency and clarity are essential for the purposes of public morality, in this section I articulate an ethic based on this maxim the meaning of which can be readily grasped, and even appreciated, by those from a variety of backgrounds

Note that I am not seeking to accurately *reflect* the way that a particular indigenous African people has understood ethics (or the above maxim about it). Instead, I draw on the way that a variety of sub-Saharan societies and thinkers informed by them have understood it, in order to *construct* a plausible moral theory with an African pedigree that can be used to judge contemporary social controversies, including media ethical ones.

### “A Person is a Person through Other Persons”

What, then, does it mean to say that a person is a person through other persons? Or, more carefully, which interpretation of this phrase is both continuous with sub-Saharan ethical traditions, particularly those in southern Africa (where I am based), and *prima facie* attractive as a basic moral principle?

Take the first clause. When sub-Saharans say that “a person is a person” they are not expressing a tautology. Instead, what they mean usually includes the idea that someone who is a person, in the sense of a deliberative agent such as a human being, ought to strive to become a *real* or *genuine* person, that is, someone who has exhibited moral virtue (e.g., Ramose, 1999, pp. 52–53; Menkiti, 2004).<sup>6</sup> Someone with the latter has what is somewhat famously called “*ubuntu*,” literally humanness in the Nguni languages of southern Africa. A true or complete person is someone who lives a genuinely human way of life, who displays ethical traits that human beings are in a position to exhibit in a way nothing else in the animal, vegetable, or mineral kingdoms can.

Just as one might say that a jalopy is not a “not a *real* car” (Gaie, 2007, p. 33), so Africans often say that those who lack *ubuntu* “are not a person” (Gaie, 2007, p. 32; Dandala, 2009, pp. 260–261) or that they are even “animals” (Pearce, 1990, p. 147; Bhengu, 1996, p. 27; Letseka, 2000, p. 186). That does not mean that the wicked are literally not human beings, viz., no longer subjects of human rights, but instead connotes the metaphorical point that these individuals utterly fail to exhibit human (moral) excellence and have instead actualized their lower, base nature (Ramosé, 1999, p. 53; Gyekye, 2010).

Turning now to the second clause, it tells people how to become real persons and to exhibit *ubuntu*, namely, “through other persons.” Typically this means by entering into *community* with others, or seeking to live *harmoniously* with them. It is well known that African ethics is characteristically communitarian, but this element is often left vague or is construed in a crude manner, as the collective taking precedence over the individual. As should become clear below, a sub-Saharan moral principle can really be put to work, and be attractive for giving due weight to individual interests, once one is clear about what it means to enter into community or to live harmoniously. To spell out what this plausibly involves, I start from representative comments from southern Africans about it.

Former South African Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro remarks of an *ubuntu* ethic, “harmony is achieved through close and sympathetic social relations within the group” (1998, p. 17). Gessler Muxe Nkondo, who has had positions of leadership on South Africa’s National Heritage Council, says that “*ubuntu* advocates . . . express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community” (2007, p. 91). Nhlanhla Mkhize, an academic psychologist at the University of KwaZulu-Natal who has applied *ubuntu* to conceptions of the self, remarks that “personhood is defined in relation to the community. . . . A sense of community exists if people are mutually responsive to one another’s needs. . . . (O)ne attains the complements associated with full or mature selfhood through participation in a community of similarly constituted selves. . . . To be is to belong and to participate. . . .” (2008, pp. 39, 40). For a final example, Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi, two theologians based in South Africa, say this of *ubuntu*: “Individuals consider themselves integral parts of the whole community. A person is socialised to think of himself, or herself, as inextricably bound to others . . . *Ubuntu* ethics can be termed anti-egoistic as it discourages people from seeking their own good without regard for, or to the detriment of, others and the community” (2009, pp. 69, 71–72).

These and additional construals from many other parts of Africa<sup>7</sup> about what it is to commune or to live harmoniously with others suggest two recurrent themes (initially analyzed in Metz, 2007, 2011, from which the next few paragraphs borrow). On the one hand, there is what I call “identity,” a matter of being close, belonging and participating, experiencing life as bound up with others, and considering oneself a part of the group. On the other hand, one finds reference to being sympathetic, being committed to others, responding to others’ needs, and acting for others’ good, which I label “solidarity.”

More carefully, it is revealing to understand identifying with another (or being close, belonging, etc.) to be the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes of “w-ness” and cooperative behavior. The psychological attitudes include a tendency to think of oneself as a member of a group with the other and to refer to oneself as a “we” (rather than an “I”), a disposition to feel pride or shame in what the other or one’s group does, and, at a higher level of intensity, an emotional appreciation of the other’s nature and value. The cooperative behaviors include being transparent about the terms of interaction, allowing others to make voluntary choices, acting on the basis of trust, adopting common goals, and, at the extreme end, choosing for the reason that “this is who we are.”

Exhibiting solidarity with another (or acting for others’ good, etc.) is similarly aptly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behavior. Here, the attitudes are ones positively oriented toward the other’s good and include an empathetic awareness of the other’s condition and a sympathetic emotional reaction to this awareness. The actions are not merely those likely to be beneficial, that is, to improve the other’s state, but also are ones done consequent to certain motives, say, for the sake of making the other better off or even a better person.

These specifications of what it is to commune or harmonize with others can ground a fairly rich, attractive and useable African ethic. Bringing things together, here are some concrete and revealing principled interpretations of “a person is a person through other persons”: one should become a real person, which is matter of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them; an agent ought to live a genuinely human way of life (exhibit *ubuntu*), which she can do if and only if she honors relationships of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their

quality of life; right actions are those that treat people as special in virtue of their capacity to enjoy a sense of togetherness, to participate in cooperative projects, to engage in mutual aid, and to do so consequent to sympathy and for others' sake.

One way to begin to appreciate the explanatory power of these principles when it comes to morality is their implication for the nature of wrongdoing. Since the relationship of identifying, or sharing a way of life, with other people in combination with that of exhibiting solidarity with, or caring for, others is basically what English-speakers mean by "friendliness" or a broad sense of "love," this interpretation of typical sub-Saharan values as a moral theory implies that wrong actions are, roughly, those that are not friendly.<sup>8</sup> What makes acts such as killing, raping, deceiving, exploiting, breaking promises and the like typically impermissible is that they are (extremely) unfriendly, ways of prizing division and ill-will, the discordant opposites of identity and solidarity. Such analysis fleshes out the following suggestive comments of Desmond Tutu, renowned former chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, when he says of Africans,

We say, "a person is a person through other people." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share. . . . Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. (1999, p. 35)

### Entailing Duties

Before applying this moral theory, I illustrate it some more by indicating how some major kinds of obligations can be derived from it as well as by clarifying how it differs from principles of which the reader is probably already aware. It is only in the next major section that I discuss ethical issues relating to news/opinion media in light of the principle.

Moral philosophers commonly distinguish between two major sorts of duties, those that are sometimes called "ideal" and "nonideal." The former are first-order duties that make no essential mention of any other duties, and they basically amount to ways that one should treat people who are innocent of any wrongdoing. One major corollary of the principle instructing agents to honor communal relationships is this ideal-theoretic prescription: exhibit identity and solidarity toward, and foster such relationships among, other individuals, and, especially, do not exhibit division and ill-will toward them. Roughly, one should live in a friendly way toward those who have been friendly.

Such a corollary readily accounts for obligations not to coerce, deceive, take from or take advantage of those who have done no wrong. Note the respect in which my interpretation of African morality is not collectivist or corporatist. It does not say or entail that the interests of the group must come before those of the individual; it rather prescribes treating the individual as special in virtue of her capacity to enter into relationships of identity and solidarity. My principle of honoring communal relationships, which forbids unfriendly treatment of innocent individuals, accounts for human rights much more readily than does a principle instructing agents to maximize the general welfare or to abide by social norms (Metz, 2011, 2012).

Nonideal duties are second-order ones about how to handle the violation of first-order duties. They tell an agent how she should treat the guilty, those who have failed to do what they morally should have done in the first place. On this score, a basic principle of respecting communal

relationships entails the following standard for dealing with wrongdoers: in response to an absence of communal relationships or the presence their opposites, exhibit division and ill-will only to the degree that is necessary and sufficient to counteract it and to no greater degree than it. The basic idea is that one is permitted to be comparably unfriendly toward another only as essential to prevent or compensate for his actual or expected unfriendliness.

This corollary is meant to capture intuitions about the propriety of self-defense, compensatory justice, and criminal punishment. One may use coercion or otherwise act in an unfriendly way by, for example, punishing, threatening to impose harm, or forcibly redistributing, when essential for rebutting another's initial unfriendliness.

Below when aiming to account for myriad duties in the context of media ethics, I routinely appeal to one of these two corollaries. Much theoretical work is achieved by appealing to the idea that honoring communal relationships of identity and solidarity is more or less constituted by treating the friendly in a friendly way and responding to the unfriendly in an unfriendly way as essential to rebut their unfriendliness.

### Contrasts with Western Approaches

There is much more that could be said about what *ubuntu* might involve as a plausible moral theory. However, the above analysis is enough to appreciate some of its differences from the principles most prominent in contemporary media ethical reflection.

I have already suggested above that the Afro-communal moral theory is neither relativist nor utilitarian, where many forms of Western communitarianism are either ultimately one or the other (e.g., Walzer, 1983; Sandel, 1998). First, the basic requirement to prize community does not mean doing whatever a given social group believes is right, and instead means treating relationships of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life, as defined above, as good for their own sake. Rightness is objective, for talk of "community" picks out a specific kind of relationship to treat as having utmost final value, not a subjective, variable standard.<sup>9</sup>

Also, consider three major differences (there are others) between utilitarianism and the African ethic described. Firstly, utilitarianism deems rightness to inhere solely in an action's long-term consequences on quality of life. African ethics does require agents to act for the well-being of one another, and, while that might seem utilitarian, honoring friendliness also means helping others to become better people, not just better off. The African moral theory prescribes not only promoting people's welfare, but also, unlike utilitarianism, improving their character, roughly, making them more friendly.

Second, utilitarians place no basic moral value on relationships in which people identify with one another. What matters for them is whether an action improves individual lives as an aggregate. This is not true for the friend of the African morality, who fundamentally values (in part) sharing a life with others, roughly having a sense of togetherness and engaging in joint projects. Such identifying with others is a way of relating that has to temper any concern to promote well-being, whether as part of realizing a state of affairs in the long run or as part of a friendly relationship.

Third, a classic utilitarian is well understood to require an agent to succeed in benefiting others, whereas the African principle does not. For example, suppose a person dives into the ocean to rescue someone who is drowning. The diver does not know that he cannot succeed,



and so all he achieves is to risk his own life and exhaust himself. A typical utilitarian would say the diver had performed a wrong act, whereas a friend of the African ethic would say he had identified with another and exhibited good-will and hence acted rightly.

Here, now, are some respects in which Kantianism contrasts with the African ethic as construed above. Part of identifying with others is not to subordinate them but instead to coordinate behavior, avoiding coercion and deception (of the innocent). Kantian ethics forbids degrading people's capacity to make choices, so that coercion and deception are well known for being generally impermissible. It might seem, therefore, that African ethics is Kantian. However, like the utilitarian, the Kantian places no fundamental moral value on identifying with others. A Kantian can treat others' autonomy with respect by being distanced and not including them in any "we."

Furthermore, African ethics, unlike Kantian, requires agents to strive to improve other people's well-being. Kantians standardly believe that people's welfare, at least as normally construed by utilitarians and other self-described "welfarists," does not matter at a basic moral level. What ultimately matters is respecting people's capacity for autonomy, and, while that often requires supporting others' psychological abilities to make voluntary decisions and assisting them to achieve their goals, neither of these exhausts what is normally meant by improving another's "welfare." After all, the content of people's goals, what they have set as ends to be achieved, might have nothing to do with their own happiness—intuitively construed as either pleasant experiences, satisfied desires, or objective goods such as knowledge and beauty.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, for a Kantian, the role of the state is naturally understood to be merely to protect people's ability to choose their own way of life, even if they are not inclined to choose wisely. As Kant once said, "a government established on the principle of benevolence towards the people . . . is the greatest conceivable *despotism*" (1793). A friend of African ethics, however, characteristically believes the state should foster ways of life that are likely to be good for people, and, in particular, that prompt them to honor communal relationships. So, while a Kantian state would probably focus on distributing money to its poorer citizens, enabling them to make a wide array of choices, a state adhering to an Afro-communitarian ethic would provide opportunities that are particularly likely to contribute to a better life, such as resources to experience the arts, to enjoy neighborhood parks, and to partake of couples counseling. The same remarks apply to John Rawls's neo-Kantian conception of justice and rightness more generally (1999). For him, the proper aim of a state, and of moral action beyond it, is to protect people's primary goods such as liberties, wealth and self-respect (self-esteem), which are generally useful means, and not to promote any final goods, that is, conditions good for their own sake.

Although *what* is to be distributed differs between Rawlsian liberals and Afro-communitarians, one might plausibly suspect that *how* it is to be distributed would be similar among them, that is, focusing on the worst-off. The guiding principle, here, for the latter is basically how goods would be allocated among a group the members of which prize friendly or loving relationships among one another. Consider, for instance, an analogy with a family. In an attractive family, it would be natural for resources to be substantially directed toward those who doing the least well. However, it is also intuitively the case that a worst-off child would not rightly command resources to the point that another, particularly talented child could not also flourish. Unlike in Rawls' system, the worst-off in familial and other communal groups

do not command what economists call a “dictatorship” when it comes to determining who gets how much. Those at the bottom are instead given great consideration that needs to be balanced against the interests of others, roughly so that everyone receives an adequate share.

The idea that actions are wrong insofar as they are unfriendly (or, more carefully, fail to honor communal relationships) differs from the more common ideas that they fail to comport with a group’s norms, do not maximize the general welfare in the long run, treat others’ capacity for autonomy disrespectfully, or do not adequately secure primary goods. Although I suspect that the Afro-communal theory does better than these other principles at accounting for journalism ethics and media ethics generally, this cannot be demonstrated in this article. In the following, I instead aim to show that such an undertaking would be worth doing in light of the former principle’s ability to account for an array of duties binding on the state and the media regarding news/opinion.

### DUTIES OF THE MEDIA WITH REGARD TO THE STATE AND PUBLIC

By the “media” I include shareholders, board members, editors, and reporters, and here I am interested in their obligations to the society in which they live, that is, the public and the government that represents it. Sometimes I discuss the duties of media persons as a group, while other times I indicate duties particular to a given position. And the duties on which I focus are those related to the content of news and opinion pieces. I first address what the nature of this content should be and afterward how it should be obtained.

#### Dis/respectful Content

One major issue in journalism ethics concerns when it is permissible to be unflattering of a person and, one could add, to what degree. According to the principle of respecting people insofar as they can commune, much depends on whether the target is reasonably suspected of having done wrong or not.

When it comes to the innocent, recall that the moral theory entails that one must exhibit identity and solidarity toward others if they have done so. It follows straightaway that defamation and related forms of reputation damage are impermissible. It also follows that it would be wrong for a writer to seek to publish sexist or other discriminatory invective, as well as wrong for an editor to allow it to go to press. Expressing such claims hardly exhibits either identity or solidarity with a large array of innocents. For example, appealing to a South African context, David Bullard (2010) should not have submitted a newspaper column that repeated many hurtful stereotypes about black people below the Sahara desert, and the editor should not have published it, with both subsequently apologizing to the public for the unnecessary hurt and offense caused.

Whether the paper was right to fire Bullard for having written this piece is another matter, as is whether the state would have been justified in either prohibiting the press from having published it or punishing it for having done so.<sup>11</sup> At this point remember that I am addressing the moral duties of the press, not what rights its various members might have against others. Just because an act by a writer or editor is wrong does not mean that another party may justly

use force in reaction to it; in some cases, members of the press probably have a “right to do wrong,” where, for all that has been said so far, it would be even more wrong for another agent to violate that right.

Although the Afro-communal ethic entails that it would be wrong to express negative judgments of those who have done no wrong, it can justify them in respect of those who have. Recall the non-ideal principle that if someone has misused his capacity to commune with others, and if being comparably discordant toward him would be likely to protect his victims, say, by preventing future similar acts by him, then it would be permissible to be discordant toward him, that is, to be divisive and to act on ill will. This provides a sensible explanation of why, say, satirical cartoons that target corrupt and negligent politicians are entirely welcome, at least if the dishing out is distributed fairly.

Although those in South Africa might recall that many adherents to an African ethic were upset with a newspaper that elected to print a photo of *The Spear*, a painting disparaging of the country’s president, my interpretation of sub-Saharan morality entails that their anger was unjustified. Many of them said that it is wrong by *ubuntu* to be derogatory of an elder, but that is true only in the proper sense of “elder” among Africans, namely, one who is upright and wise, not merely one who has a position of authority or is of a certain age. Respect should track real personhood, *ubuntu*, and not mere hierarchy or grayness.

In addition, the principle that unfriendliness can be permissible as a way to rebut another’s unfriendliness explains why it would not be wrong for the press to use words such as “murderer” to describe one who has killed unjustifiably, even if he had been granted amnesty for the act from the state (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2011). To use such a word would be to tell the truth, and while it would hardly be welcome on the part of the one so labelled, it would aid his victims and give him a stinging reminder not to perform similar acts in the future.

## Relevant Content

Which sort of information should the media be disseminating? Even if a capitalist economy legally allows a firm to publish strictly with the aim of maximizing profit, it does not follow that it is morally permissible for a media house to publish just anything that sells. I first explain how the Afro-communitarian ethic grounds an obligation on the media to help the public, and then indicate the form that the help should take.

Traditional African ethics is well-known for imposing weighty duties to aid extended family and members of one’s kin (Appiah, 1998), so that “charity begins at home” and “family first” are oft-cited maxims (e.g., Ramose, 2003, p. 385). The Afro-communal ethic above captures this dimension by entailing greater duties to care for the quality of lives of those with whom one already shares a way of life. Although everyone matters morally, as being capable of communing, those with whom one has in fact communed, at least in the form of identifying with them, command extra attention. This point implies that one can have obligations to help others that one has not voluntarily assumed by, say, having promised to do so or been ordered to by a legitimate authority. Extant ties encumber; upon identifying with others, one has established part of a morally significant relationship that demands respect and hence full-blown realization in the form of solidarity as well.<sup>12</sup> Since the media are embedded in a particular society, sharing a sense of togetherness with the public and engaging in cooperative exchanges with it, the media have an obligation to help it and to do so at *some* cost to profits.

How, then, should those who own a media company use it to aid the public with whom it shares a way of life? My answer is: at least in part by fostering communal relationships between residents themselves as well as between residents and the state. For community to obtain at a societal level, there must be substantial transparency about how people are interacting and affecting each other's interests. People cannot genuinely *share* a way of life in the realms of civil society and politics unless they are accurately informed about what is happening and how things could be otherwise. In order, therefore, for individuals to develop good character by communing with others, the media must help them by providing the truth about fundamental relationships, policies and institutions in society (news) as well as visions of alternate versions of them (opinion), so that they can make free and informed choices about how to live together. The familiar values of impartiality, objectivity, independence and the like follow in the wake of this reasoning.<sup>13</sup> It is not enough to publish whatever is expected to sell or otherwise bring in funds; if one media outlet insufficiently addressed facts responsible for much that goes on in a society, and instead focused on more surface, sensationalist issues of sex and violence, then it would be exploiting other outlets in the marketplace that did not do that.

This rationale incorporates the more standard social responsibility or democracy-based argument for relevant and accurate content, but goes beyond it. For the state to honor communal relationships requires it to share political power with its citizens, that is, to be democratic. We all know the arguments for thinking that a strong democracy requires the media to present certain content to readers, including allowing competing political parties and perspectives airtime and print space. However, communal relationships can obtain beyond citizens and their state; the shareholders and board members of a media conglomerate, according to the present view, also have a duty to foster community between citizens themselves, including private businesses and civil society organizations. I presume Clifford Christians, a well-known communitarian in the field, means something broad like this when he eloquently remarks, "the goal of reporting becomes civic transformation. . . . The challenge for reporting is whether it serves to activate the polis" (2004, p. 249).

Note that this requires publishing material not merely about government corruption and other negative activities by it and other influential agents. Citizens also need to be aware of positive works by the government and other institutions, in order to obtain a clear picture of social interaction and thereby be able to share a way of life (and to act in ways likely to benefit one another). A watchdog function is a necessary, but not sufficient, role for the media.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, beyond facilitating a sense of togetherness and joint projects among residents in relation to themselves and to their state, the media also have an obligation to present content that would be good for people in the sense of being likely to improve their quality of life. These would be ways of exhibiting solidarity with the public. For example, the media should (continue to) feature columns in which experts routinely share wisdom about relationships, dispense advice about financial matters, and discuss consumer affairs. For another example, the media should publish in-depth articles about how to buy a home or access municipal services. Indeed, two theorists sympathetic to facets of *ubuntu* remark that "a normative value for the media would then also be to play a role in rectifying material inequalities. Through their reporting the media should aim to serve the transformation of society" (Wasserman & de Beer, 2005, p. 202; see also Blankenberg, 1999, pp. 47–48).

The deep conflict the reader might have expected between truth and harmony does not arise on my interpretation of African morality. For one, a communal relationship, by definition, is one

that includes a shared way of life, which, in turn, is understood to consist of activity consequent to free and informed consent. For another, the basic principle I have expounded prescribes treating communal relationships with respect, *not* doing whatever it takes to *maximally promote* them. For a third, revealing wrongdoing is to honor the value of community, as it brings to light discordant behavior. Although disclosing unwelcome truths might cause unhappiness or anger, that would not necessarily dishonor the value of relationships of identity and solidarity.

### Obtaining Content

So far I have addressed which information the media should convey, but now I turn to how the information should be obtained in the first place. That is, I take up some classic issues in investigative ethics.

Uncontested respects in which a reporter must behave ethically are covered by the requirement to be friendly toward those who have themselves been friendly. A demand to enter into identity and solidarity with others rules out breaking promises, intimidating people, and similar kinds of subordinating behavior.

Harder cases are those concerning undercover work and privacy, and, here, the African moral theory might part ways to some degree with some influential codes of ethics. With regard to withholding the truth about one's aim as a reporter, or even using deception about it, it is common for ethical codes to permit this when it is necessary for the sake of a "clear public interest" (as per the BBC's editorial guidelines) or "information vital to the public" (à la the Society of Professional Journalists), often with a rider about the means not being disproportionate to the value of the story. A natural interpretation of these phrasings seems to permit journalists to treat innocent individuals merely as a means to an end, to treat them in an unfriendly way when they themselves have not been unfriendly, for the sake of the greater good. If the story would do much for public understanding, and if for some reason the only way to obtain it were to manipulate a person who had done no wrong, a plain reading of many codes would allow doing so.

However, I balk at that in light of the nonideal facet of the Afro-communal principle directing one to be unfriendly only as necessary to rebut the comparable unfriendliness of another. If there were strong evidence that someone is a wrongdoer or complicit in wrongdoing, then trickery would be justified as a way to bring the wrongdoing to light, and presumably to end it thereby. So, the principle certainly does allow a reporter to withhold her purpose from, or even to lie about it to, a potential source, when engaging with one who has initially been divisive and acted on ill will and when no other method will work. However, when the potential source is utterly innocent, the present moral theory entails that it would be wrong to do so.

Now, it can become difficult to determine when someone counts as "utterly" innocent. If someone could prevent a great amount of harm done by others at little or no cost to himself by revealing information to a journalist, and if he refused to do so, then it would become plausible to see him as failing in his duty to exhibit solidarity and hence as no longer "utterly" innocent. Refusing to help others avoid significant burdens, when doing so would not be at all burdensome to oneself, is itself a wrong, and so may open the door to some permissible trickery and intrusion on the part of a journalist.

Similar remarks and qualifications apply to intrusions upon people's privacy. According to the Afro-communal principle above, it would be wrong to act in an unfriendly way toward

others, if they have not been unfriendly. It follows that it is morally wrong to invade the privacy of innocents merely in order to procure lurid details the publication of which is expected to sell newspapers or otherwise promote profits. It would also be wrong to do so in order to promote the public good, again supposing the invasion of someone's privacy were not necessary to rebut his initial prizing of relationships of division and ill will.

However, there can be reasonable disagreement about when someone has been unfriendly or in the relevant respect. Take, for instance, a case well known in South Africa of the medical records of the former Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang (Beresford, 2007). In 2005 Tshabalala-Msimang had been admitted to a Cape Town hospital, where a copy of her medical records was evidently stolen and passed on to a newspaper that in 2007 published the fact that she had had substantial amounts of alcohol smuggled into the clinic, which she drank during her stay. Dali Mpfu, who had been editor-in-chief of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (the government's public television and web news service), resigned from the national news editors' forum as a result, maintaining that publication of the health minister's private records was "far removed from the basic value of Ubuntu" and indicative of the "deterioration of journalistic ethics within your ranks and disrespect for our people" (Mpfu, 2007). Was he correct?

On the one hand, breaking hospital rules in order to drink alcohol during one's visit may be seen as imprudent, or as sad evidence of alcoholism. That is, one might view it as something purely self-regarding, and not harmful or divisive with respect to others, and hence impermissible for a newspaper to reveal. On the other hand, though, in 2007 the health minister had received a liver transplant, with suggestions abound that the rules did not entitle her to it on grounds of alcoholism, among other things. In addition, one might suggest that in such a position of authority and leadership, the health minister had an obligation to set a good example, particularly in a society with one of the worst fetal alcohol syndrome rates in the world as well as one of the highest violent crimes rates, substantially linked to alcohol. Abusing alcohol in that context might then count as failing to exhibit *ubuntu*; perhaps there was good reason, then, to think "she had it coming," so that by the present moral theory the newspaper was permitted to infringe her privacy so as to correct her misbehavior.

## DUTIES OF THE STATE WITH REGARD TO THE MEDIA

In the previous section I indicated how a principle of respect for communal relationships of identity and solidarity entails duties on the part of media houses, editors, and reporters with regard to news/opinion. In contrast, here I take up their rights or, equivalently, the duties of the state with regard to them, naturally focusing on issues of freedom of speech and its limits.

### Freedom of Speech

A default position of freedom of speech clearly follows from a commitment to honor community. By the ideal-theoretic aspect, a given agent must be friendly to those who have been friendly. So, if a newspaper has not been unfriendly in any manner, and is simply making the public aware of truths about society and the state, as per its duty, while also allowing contributors to express their opinions, then it would be wrong for the state to be unfriendly by, say, making threats or punishing. If a newspaper has been unfriendly toward a person or institution

but has been so only to a comparable degree for the purpose of preventing unfriendliness on their part, then, again, there is no wrongdoing, that is, no disrespect of communal relationships, on the media's part, and no interference from the state would be justified.

### Limits to Freedom of Speech

I have argued that if the news/opinion media have merely sought to foster a shared way of life by making social and political relationships more transparent and broadening people's critical horizons, there is no permissible ground for the state to restrict them. Doing so would undermine the prospect of richly cooperative socio-political projects. However, there are occasions when the state may rightly intervene, and these are times when the media are themselves not acting in a sufficiently friendly manner. Here I discuss three respects in which state interference with the media would in principle be permissible.

One way the media could act wrongly would be to fail to help the public by disseminating accurate and useful information about fundamental aspects of society and by providing a forum for a variety of competing reasonable views, which it is obligated to do (according to the previous section). If private media houses were not doing what they should to inform the public in ways that would facilitate communal relationships, at least if the state could not afford to do so on its own with public broadcasting, then the state may use force as necessary and proportionate to get them to do so. For instance, it could threaten to withdraw a license to broadcast or could require a certain percentage of a firm's shareholders or board members be those with a keen interest not merely in making profit but also in establishing community.

The rationale for interference so as to determine media content is similar to those justifying progressive taxation and Samaritan laws requiring people to rescue others in emergency circumstances. If you are in a position to substantially help others at little cost to yourself (especially those with whom you share a way of life), and if you fail to do so, then you may rightly be the target of coercion and similarly unfriendly behavior.

A second occasion for permissible state interference with the media is when the latter has been unfriendly regarding people's reputations or standing. If reporters and editors have published claims they know to be false about someone, or have failed to take due care when considering their accuracy, then they have acted wrongly, viz., in an unfriendly way, where the unfriendliness was not meant to rebut another's unfriendliness. Theoretically, then, the state may respond in an unfriendly way on behalf of the aggrieved party.

However, note that such a response would have to be necessary to counteract the media's unfriendliness, to be likely to do so, and to involve the least unfriendliness necessary to do so. Hence, demanding an apology, having a right to reply, appealing to an ombudsman's judgment, and seeking compensatory justice should be front-line responses to media recklessness and negligence. State punishment would be permissible only if media wrongdoing were intentional, systematic, and egregious, and if chilling effects would not be substantial.

When the state is the one that considers itself to have been wronged by the media, then an independent third party should adjudicate the dispute. While it follows that it can be perfectly right to hold the media accountable when they fail to properly value communal relationships, it does not follow that a state-run "media tribunal" that imposes penalties and requires the registration of journalists would be justified, *contra* the views of many members of South Africa's current government (Daniels, 2011).

Lastly, the state may prohibit speech that is outright harmful, including speech that is likely to provoke violence and secrets about military defense the disclosure of which would genuinely threaten national security. Although a concern for community *prima facie* means that the state should permit and encourage transparency about its workings, so as to facilitate a shared way of life between it and its residents, sometimes transparency could risk great harm to them, undermining the other, key value of caring for their quality of life. In these cases, since the media would be failing to honor the good of community by doing something foreseeably likely to substantially reduce people's well-being, that is, flouting solidarity, the African moral theory would permit a state to disallow the media from publishing such material.

Of course, it will be the tendency of states to misapply the present principle, removing from the public eye much more than is justified on the principled grounds of solidarity toward it. However, a party's inclination to misapply a principle does not mean that the principle is false or unjustified, and, in all but extreme scenarios, does not even mean that one should refrain from advocating the principle. Instead, the battle should be over what truly counts as the "national interest" and when disclosing information would in fact be likely to threaten it.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I have articulated a novel moral-philosophical principle with a sub-Saharan pedigree and discussed what it entails for some core obligations of the news/opinion media and the state. A thorough defense of the principle and its implications warrants being undertaken elsewhere, at least for the reason that they look pretty attractive in themselves. I like to think that an appeal to a single principle has done a reasonably good job of entailing and plausibly explaining a variety of duties binding on reporters, editors, shareholders, and the state insofar as it interacts with them.

This article has hardly addressed all important media ethical issues, having entirely set aside non-cognitive functions such as entertainment and advertising. In addition, it has not even addressed all controversies regarding cognitive functions, including topics such as which pictures and videos may be used to convey information, how decisions should be made about which stories to run (see Kasoma, 1996, pp. 109–110), whether reporters should engage in "participatory" journalism with their "sources" (Blankenberg, 1999), or which kinds of political campaigning are permissible and should be permitted by a media house. I hope the reader will agree that it would be of interest to see just how far the single principle can extend, particularly in comparison to Western competitors.

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## NOTES

1. There are of course those who eschew the search for this kind of theoretical monism, for example, Fourie (2011, p. 38), but I take the legitimacy of the quest for granted here.
2. For just two recent examples that use a more limited sense of “normative theory,” see Christians et al. (2009) and Fourie (2011).
3. The work of Christians (2004) come closest to what is advanced in this article, though he does not address the array of issues that it does, and, when he does address some of them, he often has a different opinion about them. Related work includes that of Christians, Ferre, and Fackler (1993); Fackler (2003); and Wasserman (2013).
4. There are traces in Aristotle’s conception of friendship, Marx’s early conception of species-being, and the contemporary ethic of care. When I call something “African” or “sub-Saharan,” I mean to pick out characteristic features, properties that are salient there in a way they tend not to be elsewhere. Such use of these terms is not meant to imply that these features are either utterly unique to, or even exhaustive of, the continent or even the region below the Sahara desert.
5. Or sometimes “I am because we are.”
6. I focus on the normative dimensions of the phrase, while others instead highlight some ontological ones that I do not consider essential for a coherent moral theory (e.g., Fackler, 2003, p. 317; Christians, 2004, pp. 241–243).
7. See the remarks of Nigerians Segun Gbadegesin (1991, p. 65) and Pantaleon Iroegbu (2005, p. 442), Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye (2004, p. 16), and Kenyan Dismas Masolo (2010, p. 240).
8. At least in response to those who have not themselves been comparably unfriendly, on which see the next subsection.
9. Cf. Christians (2004, pp. 244–245), who also works to distinguish a relational theory from a relativist one.
10. Of course, if one understands a person’s happiness to be equivalent to the achievement of her goals, as Kantians sometimes do (e.g., O’Neill, 1980), then a Kantian ethic does require one to pursue the happiness of others, albeit in that very specific sense differing from the one relevant to African ethics.
11. South Africa has an Equality Court tasked with investigating hate speech, discrimination and related matters that in principle could have taken up the matter, had members of the public lodged a complaint (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2011).
12. I first made this point in a medical ethics context (Metz, 2010, pp. 55–57).
13. For opposing views about what *ubuntu* entails on this score, see Blankenberg (1999, p. 59), Christians (2004, pp. 247–248), and Fourie (2011, p. 37). Sorting out our disagreement would require, among other things, a fine-grained discussion about the bearing of participation with, and advocacy for, community members on the capacity to apprehend fact.
14. Here I place many elements of “constructive journalism” in a larger, theoretical context.

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