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SPJ MEETS CST: A CODE FOR JOURNALISM THAT MATTERS

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Introduction

The field of journalism faces many challenges as it continues to roll through the 21st century. There are changes in the distribution and consumption of news content, changes in technology that affect the methodology of how news material is gathered and changes in the perception of the public in the aims and intent of some news organizations and their reporting.

The public's trust in the news media has been on a decline. A 2016 Gallup poll showed only 32% of respondents had a great or fair amount of trust in the news media reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly (Swift, 2016).

The polling service concludes that “when opinion-driven writing becomes something like the norm, Americans may be wary of placing trust on the work of media institutions that have less rigorous reporting criteria than in the past” (Swift, 2016, para. 8).

The modern-day pressure to be first and fast with news reporting (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) as well as the blurring of the line between straight-forward news reporting and commentary have bent, if not broken, ethical guidelines for the industry.

There are challenges as well for living and applying Catholic social teaching (CST). It requires sacrifice. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) states that “Catholic social teaching is built on a commitment to the poor.” The USCCB says CST

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calls on all of us to “to reach out and to build relationships of love and justice.” In so many cultures where secular norms and secular interpretations take precedent, the USCCB reminds us that CST calls for a self-awareness and action that must be “rooted in and strengthened by our spiritual lives” (USCCB, 1998).

The code of ethics of many news organizations rightfully put the emphasis on reporting facts as the foundation for good journalism. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) state in the preamble to its 2014 revised code that “Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

As a former writer, producer, and executive at a network news organization, I and my colleagues faced those pressures in our daily work. As an educator of future journalists, I do impart to my students the skills of how to ask questions, write and report stories. But I also seek to ground my students in something more than just how to type words or base their ethical actions on just one document like the code of ethics of SPJ.

Could the paradigm for good journalism come not from an entity focused on journalism but from concepts including “building a just society” (USCCB, n.d.) as Catholic social teaching embodies?

CST and reflections on it, and the field of journalism, from Church leaders offer markers for journalists to apply. Msgr. John Strykowski,

speaking at a CST conference in Warsaw, Poland in 2017, states that “Catholic social teaching is a call to conscience (Winters, 2017). That thinking offers a guidepost for journalists to consider moving away from confrontation, sensationalism and doing reports that aim to simply attract attention to the stories they present to the public. The result of that move could also help to decrease the negative perceptions of news consumers about the news media.

The Sanctity of Journalism

In his address to journalists on June 4, 2000, St. John Paul II, reminded the assembled communicators that their profession was more than just work. He urged them to incorporate their faith into their duties and told them to ask “themselves about the meaning of your vocation as committed Christians in the world of communications.” He then went further and described journalism as “a ‘sacred’ task, to be carried out with the awareness that the powerful means of communication are entrusted to you for the common good...” (John Paul II, 2000).

CST predates St. John Paul’s comments but raised similar themes in how the impactful profession of journalism can address the work it does. In his encyclical *Libertas*, issued in June 1888, Pope Leo XII, supported the notion of a greater exchange of information as he wrote, “...to all matter of opinion which God leaves to man’s free discussion, full liberty of thought and of speech is naturally within the right of everyone; for such liberty never leads men to suppress the truth, but often to discover it and make it known” (Leo XIII, 1888).

David E. DeCosse (2007) reflects on the progression of greater press freedom and its relationship to CST when he described how the Second Vatican Council fostered a positive link between persons, the press and the common good. He cites Pope John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), that reinforced a person’s “right to be informed truthfully about public events” (p. 877).

The pillars of Catholic social teaching are the

dignity of the human person, the solidarity of humankind as “one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences [and] our brothers and sisters keepers, wherever they may be” (USCCB, 1998) and finally subsidiarity, which holds that the state should undertake only those tasks which are beyond the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently (Catholic Social Teaching in Action, n.d.).

What can journalism and journalists take from these foundations? Strengthening ethical standards and actions.

Catholic social teaching’s emphasis on an understanding of human life and the dignity of each life is not consistently reinforced in applying journalism or even in teaching journalism. A possible approach is for each journalist to consider the basic premise that each human life is sacred and consider how to present the news in a way that respects each life.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics has four specific sections, or ethical pillars, of its own: seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable and transparent. The details of the code offer guidelines to reporters on a variety of issues that relate to reporting. They include accuracy, avoiding stereotyping, balancing the right to know versus privacy, avoiding conflicts of interest and acknowledging mistakes (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). These ethical guidelines are similar in wording to many news organizations.

The SPJ ethical concepts, combined with Catholic social teaching, can open journalists’ eyes to see that their responsibilities go beyond filing stories on the latest events.

When reporting the news, context brings the fullness and relevance of a story to journalism. It is the background of a story, the circumstances that came before the immediate news story that is being reported. It provides history and insight for the news consumer.

The context of Catholic social teaching being integrated into the journalist’s mind-set should be

viewed as the realization that news stories carry more than just facts. They carry the details of impact on people and communities. These do not relate to just stories of disasters or historic events.

Journalism can raise stories that on the surface seem to be about small, unknown, and even unseen events to be stories that can connect persons and communities.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications issued the document *Ethics in Communications* in 2000 and cited the Pastoral Instruction on Social Communications' *Communio et Progressio* to reinforce that,

the media are called to serve human dignity by helping people live well and function as persons in community. Media do this by encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue. (Pontifical Council For Social Communications, 2000)

In his address "Teaching the Ethics of Communications in a Catholic University," Msgr. Paul Tighe (2010), secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, told attendees at the Minuto de Dios University that ethical standards are linked to the same standards CST is built upon.

He stated that the first concern for instruction would be to "promote a commitment to truth" (Tighe, 2010). Then he added, "Other values that will be found in Catholic ethical reflection, albeit not exclusively to it, include the promotion of respect for the dignity and worth of every human being, the refusal to debase humans, the refusal of all words and gestures calculated to promote hatred and intolerance" and concludes the thought, "Catholic Social teaching frequently alerts us to the importance of communication in

the promotion of human solidarity, peace and reconciliation."

The Contemporary State of Journalism

It is not unusual to see journalists today in conflict and adversarial relationships with the subjects of their stories. Conflict is typically considered one aspect of what makes news: the conflict or controversy between two interests, persons or issues is what attracts news consumers. The conflictual approach has become commonplace in the methodology of how reporters gather news and information.

Claims of "fake news" worsen the tension between those doing the reporting and those being reported on.

In the current journalism climate, some politicians are using the oldest form of manipulation like false news, rumor, and innuendo as weapons against journalists. Persons being reported on make accusations like "fake news" as a grenade to lob against news providers to make them the enemy. This tries to stifle the traditional watchdog function over the government which is considered a guiding principle of freedom of the press in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It also undermines the public trust in journalism.

Journalists must also adhere to the legitimately high standard of making sure their reporting is not "fake" in any way though issues related to reporting accuracy are not new.

The "yellow journalism" of the late 19th century focused more on what was sensational or could be sensationalized as opposed to what was fact based (Office of the Historian, n.d.). In his book *Mightier Than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History*, Rodger Streitmatter (1997) points out that the intersection of publishers like William Randolph Hearst's efforts to grow his newspaper circulation over stories about Cubans trying to break free from Spanish rule led to "a high pitched and bumptious jingoism

Journalists must also adhere to the legitimately high standard of making sure their reporting is not "fake" in any way though issues related to reporting accuracy are not new.

and a national hunger for war” (p. 69) over the 1898 explosion that sunk the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor (p. 69).

In the late 20th century, the efforts to pursue higher television ratings and boost advertising revenue, found some newscasts focusing on diverse kinds of conflict, namely crime and violence. Why? Because fear-based news stories were highlighted to prey on viewers’ anxieties (Serani, 2011). The aim was to drive viewers to watch out of concern and out of a morbid curiosity.

“If a busload of kids went off the road in Ceylon, it led the newscast,” Tom Jicha writes as TV critic at the Sun-Sentinel in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. “It was all sizzle, very little substance” (Borden, 1997, para. 3).

The trend in focusing on these kinds of stories brought some ratings gains to broadcasters but also alienated some viewers. The focus has subsided somewhat, but even a 2012 Pew Research Center study on the leading topics of news videos on both YouTube and network news television found that death and destruction, including disasters, overwhelmingly led all categories of news coverage (Pew Research Center, 2012).

In the presidential campaign of 2016, the acrimony escalated between some political camps and the news media. Some journalists also embraced becoming more than being reporters of events. They straddled, and some crossed, the line between solely reporting and began to provide commentary. The refrain of “fake news” was hurled at several long-established media organizations. There was reporting that confirmed instances of incorrect journalism and that helped justify those “fake news” accusations. Other times, “fake news” charges were made about opinion stories that were never designed to be traditional news reports and those claims reinforced the belief that “fake news” was hurled at journalists purely for political purposes (Korte, 2018).

Technology too has played a role in confusing the public over what seems real and what is indeed fake. Misinformation can easily spread through the internet in what appear to be legitimate news

outlets. Social media can spread rumors and gossip when “friends” and followers pass along things that have been heard or seen but not fact-checked.

Social media in the hands of all citizens can blur the line of what the public distributes as “information.” When that information is sent from user to user, follower to follower, these citizen information disseminators assume the appearance of journalists, but their Tweets, posts or uploads may not meet established journalism ethics which seeks to verify, fact-check and confirm story details before reporting the news to their audiences.

The distribution of information is the domain of every person who uses a device like a smartphone, tablet, or computer. The tricky question for the public is how to distinguish true journalism from casual information that is forwarded from friends and strangers.

The issue of fake news, although not a new phenomenon in the world of news, has become a major discussion point in society. It involves all stakeholders in the news continuum and requires news providers to news consumers “to combat the scourge of fake news. This ranges from supporting investigative journalism, reducing financial incentives for fake news, and improving digital literacy among the public” (West, 2017).

On January 24, 2018, Pope Francis released his message for the annual World Communications Day in May 2018. The Pontiff focused on his concern for fake news. He framed his message on the impact of “fake news” to each person.

“Fake news is a sign of intolerant and hypersensitive attitudes and leads only to the spread of arrogance and hatred,” he wrote. “That is the end result of untruth” (Francis, 2018).

His message echoed themes of Catholic social teaching and the message that St. John Paul II delivered eighteen years earlier. Pope Francis continued:

The best antidotes to falsehoods are not strategies, but people: people who are not greedy but ready to listen, people who make the effort to engage in sincere dialogue so that the truth can emerge;

people who are attracted by goodness and take responsibility for how they use language. If responsibility is the answer to the spread of fake news, then a weighty responsibility rests on the shoulders of those whose job is to provide information, namely, journalists, the protectors of news. In today's world, theirs is, in every sense, not just a job; it is a mission. Amid feeding frenzies and the mad rush for a scoop, they must remember that the heart of information is not the speed with which it is reported or its audience impact, but persons. Informing others means forming others; it means being in touch with people's lives. That is why ensuring the accuracy of sources and protecting communication are real means of promoting goodness, generating trust, and opening the way to communion and peace. (Francis, 2018)

He concluded by calling for a "journalism created by people for people, one that is at the service of all, especially those – and they are the majority in our world – who have no voice..." (Francis, 2018).

The SPJ Code of Ethics reminds journalists that they serve the role "as watchdogs over public affairs and government" and they need to be "vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable [and give] voice to the voiceless" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). These themes mesh with the words of the Holy Father. Both the SPJ and the Pope do not encourage journalists to provide news coverage that is bland or just on topics that are light and frivolous. Both encourage journalists to be proactive in reporting on matters that affect the public.

Like CST, both encourage journalists to do something greater with their work than simply transcribe words and provide details told them by others.

Going Forth

Journalism, by its nature, provides stories communicated primarily in three forms: print, online or on broadcasts. For practitioners of journalism, the challenge is how to apply some of the concepts stated here to the products journalists offer for consumption.

In 2011, Tom Rosenstiel, who founded the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, told the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Communications that journalism has shifted from being a lecture to a dialogue (O'Brien, 2011). Furthermore, he described a changing model of journalism moving from the "trust me" era of news, to the "show me" era of news" (para. 8).

Rosenstiel's insight was based on the understanding that consumers have more options on their sources of news than ever before and what they want from news providers was an emphasis on evidence in order to trust the source.

The overarching narrative for CST is in urging journalists to add the dimension of respect for the person the story is about and respect in following the proper processes used to obtain facts for the story.

What emerges as a dominant characteristic of CST is the emphasis that persons in stories are not just stereotypes. They are individuals whose specific circumstances should be the focus of the story. When facts are gathered about that person, they should be gathered professionally and respectfully. When facts are reported about that person they should be presented without malice and without infatuation.

In my role as an educator of courses on journalism, I seek opportunities to apply some of these concepts with my students. In interview exercises, I have students think of their assignment as a journalist would. They need to find the news about a friend or a fellow student, so they can focus their story on noteworthy facts about that person and not just write about them as a friend or colleague.

I remind students of the connection journalists

have with their world at large. They are fellow residents of communities, citizens of cities and towns, and participants in social life where they live. This perception of what can be seen as the CST concept of solidarity can lead to media inspired transformations for the journalism student seeing their world in a more engaged way in new lights and for audiences that consume news written by journalists more open to the stories, big and small, around them. The interactions with their communities should also open journalists' eyes not only to the stories that could be reported but to the lives of the persons around them. A typical exercise I use is to have students find a story on campus or in their home communities and they need to offer a new story focus on a regular occurring event and that focus must include the persons in the story. The journalist needs to be enterprising in finding what is new and different for news stories. I seek to have students apply the principles of CST to reflect the human dignity of every person in their stories, promote the common good and raise issues for those who have no voice to have those issues heard.

Another guideline that embodies CST thinking and intersects with the SPJ Code of Ethics is the need for a diversity of perspectives in stories. The terms fairness and balance are necessary guideposts for good journalism. There are typically many sides to stories. When the public senses that a story only presents a single point of view, it again reduces the public's trust in that journalist being fair and objective in their reporting.

In the ranks of professional journalism, there are entities seeking to apply a CST nuance to their work without mentioning it.

In a 2015 discussion on BBC Radio, former BBC news editor Charlie Beckett expressed his views that an emphasis on negative news continues (Taibi, 2015). He said journalists should not just continue to "write critically about a negative topic" like crime, wars, tragedies but also "present solutions, empower readers to act, and offer tools to help turn the bad stories into good ones."

Part of Beckett's solution is for journalists to apply modern technology to this concept.

"The same new technology that gives journalists the ability to be faster and more visual also gives them the ability to tell the *whole* story — the positive and the negative — to present a deeper, smarter and more solutions-oriented story" (Taibi, 2015, para. 16).

"If we really want to inform people in an accurate and balanced way, we also need to expose what's going right in the world," news editor Seán Dagan Wood of the website Positive.News said in the same broadcast with Beckett (Taibi, 2015, para. 17).

That thinking, of the reporter as not just a messenger on a story but as a provider of options for potential for action, is another way CST connects with journalism.

As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) writes on its webpage, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, "In a world that hungers for a sense of meaning and moral direction, this teaching offers ethical criteria for action" and to use the CST tradition "to link service and action, charity and justice (USCCB, 1998).

Good journalism reflects its watchdog function over those in power and offers a voice to the voiceless as it watches over "the powerful few in society on behalf of the many to guard against tyranny" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

This is not to say that journalists should be giving their personal suggestions or direct their audiences on specific actions they should take based on the opinion of the journalist. If they do that, the journalist is just trading the rule of one power with their own efforts to influence others through their reporting.

Instead, journalists should find the experts, participants and people involved in stories who can relate what they do and how their thoughts can apply to, at a minimum, help news consumers better understand a story or, in the best result, be able to make informed decisions on what to do.

Innovative news organizations are seeking to address these issues. Besides the previously

mentioned Positive.News website, the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), which was formed in 2013, offers a different view on the traditional presentation of news events.

The SJN website describes these impacts of their efforts:

...it offers a more accurate account of the state of play than does a dystopian ticker tape of corruption and failure. It also strengthens accountability by raising the bar and removing excuses for inaction. Done well, solutions journalism is as clear-eyed and rigorous as the most hardnosed investigative story. Its goal isn't to inoculate people from society's many problems or to blithely make them feel better about the world. It's to provide society with the information it needs to self-correct. (Solutions Journalism Network, 2017)

The website continues:

...if people only hear about the failures, it should come as no surprise that faith in democratic institutions—including the press—is crumbling. Solutions journalism helps restore trust by showing that the system can work to solve society's most pressing problems. (Solutions Journalism Network, 2017)

The concepts embodied in SJN's goals mirror CST in its support of fundamental human rights including freedom of communication. It also makes the connection, as CST does, of the relationship of journalism's work to everyone in the human family and how ultimately that work needs to be something that supports communities with information. CST, of course, goes one step further and offers a reminder that all work should be based in the charity that God calls upon all peoples to exhibit in their daily lives.

In his 2011 essay, "Civil Discourse: Speaking Truth in Love," Cardinal Donald Wuerl of the Archdiocese of Washington wrote presciently about acrimonious speech and publications that were pervading American society.

He invoked the press when he wrote of communicating the truth.

When we listen to news accounts or read what is presented in the print and electronic media, we are too often reminded that spin, selecting only some of the facts, highlighting only parts of the picture, has replaced too often an effort to present the facts -- the full story. Selecting only some facts, choosing inflammatory words, spinning the story, are activities that seem much more directed to achieving someone's political purpose rather than reporting events. (Wuerl, 2011)

Wuerl concludes with a reminder, which would certainly apply to journalists, that there is great weight in reporting the truth, based in the Christian faith:

"We must express that truth in charity with respect for others so that the bonds between us can be strengthened in building up the body of Christ" (Wuerl, 2011).

Summary

The underpinnings of CST address inequalities and have evolved and expanded over the decades from when it was first promulgated.

Journalism has evolved as well with changes in thinking about its scope and focus as well as its methodology of gathering and reporting news. Those developments have also led to considerations over whether those changes are for the worse or the better.

CST was formulated by Catholic clergy and leaders but applies not just to Catholics. It resonates for all communities because its tenets, as does the SPJ Code of Ethics, address basic human considerations. The core concepts of each deal with how to address and react to the human condition.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is aimed at addressing the conduct of persons, specifically journalists, in their work. It provides guidelines on specific ethical issues but also aims to set a broader tone for

how journalists should think about their actions related to their business. As another section of the preamble of the Code states, “An ethical journalist acts with integrity” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

CST deals with the moral conduct of persons. It wants us to consider how to act and how we relate with our fellow human beings. A standard of CST is for all of us to be stewards of what God has created. This is often focused on how communities around the world should care for our environment. But caring for God’s creation includes people. The USCCB says “we are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation” (USCCB, 1998).

The news that the SPJ Code of Ethics encourage journalists to present include news stories that “boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience,” and that “show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). It also reminds journalists to, in no uncertain terms: “abide by the same high standards they expect of others (Code of Ethics, 2014).

These directions are further connected to CST when we consider their basis in another “book” of news, the Good News of the New Testament where the word of Jesus exhorts us to show compassion and in the Sermon on the Mount reminds us to “treat people the same way you want them to treat you...” (Matthew 7:12, New American Bible, Revised Edition).

CST then asks us to not just think of, meaning just observe or analyze, the persons around us but to look for ways we can help them. Pope Benedict XVI communicates these thoughts in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth):

The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole... Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.”

(Benedict XVI, 2009, para. 48 and para. 51)

Journalism faces challenges including changes in technology and changes in the substance of news reporting that overturn traditional news standards. Some standards emphasize speed in distributing information over a more modest pace to ensure accuracy. Some standards focus on salacious content to attract audiences over emphasis on fact-based material that provides information without sensationalism.

CST can add to those secular codes of conduct that reputable news organizations embrace and remind journalists that they have a special calling dating back centuries to fulfill the population’s “awareness instinct” about the world outside their immediate space (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

Once again, the words of Pope Francis resonate as he wrote to journalists for World Communications Day 2018 when he promoted, “*a journalism of peace.*” The Pope added:

By that, I do not mean the saccharine kind of journalism that refuses to acknowledge the existence of serious problems or smacks of sentimentalism. On the contrary, I mean a journalism that is truthful and opposed to falsehoods, rhetorical slogans, and sensational headlines. (Francis, 2018)

Those thoughts can be the rocks upon which respectful, solid, ethical journalism can be built.

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About the Author

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Michael Rizzo is an Assistant Professor and the Director of the Journalism Program at the College of Professional Studies at St. John's University. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Communications at Fordham University and his Master of Business Administration in Marketing Management at St. John's University. In addition to teaching courses in the journalism program, Mr. Rizzo is a member of the Board of Directors at The Deadline Club, the New York City chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and is the New York State coordinator for the Radio and Television Digital News Association. Mr. Rizzo also writes for *The Tablet*, the newspaper of the Diocese of Brooklyn and has appeared as a guest analyst on *Currents*, the daily news show on New Evangelization Television of DeSales Media in the Brooklyn Diocese. Mr. Rizzo serves as a Research Fellow for the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University.