

The media has great power over a society because it serves so many different functions. There is print media, radio, television, and, in the past decade, interactive media. All of these technologies provide information, persuasion or entertainment, yet this barely scratches the surface on how media affects our society. Journalism and advertising are examples of disciplines that have rooted from the advent of media. Through trials and tribulations, these trades have developed ethical guidelines in which they abide by. Because each discipline serves a very different function to society, their standards are, for the most part, different, but there is one overarching concept that guides the ethical standards of both.

An overview of ethics

Before the ethical standards of journalism and advertising are discussed, it is important to have a background knowledge of ethics and its principles. Ethics is branch of moral philosophy that deals with questions of moral behavior, and it permeates many aspects of human existence (Day 3) According to Louis A. Day, the author of *Ethics in Mass Communications: Cases and Controversies*, there are two levels of ethics. First there is the general, or ethics that apply to all members of a society. The other level is particularistic ethics, or “ethical standards determined by membership within a specific group, profession or occupation.” Particularistic ethics are possible because society resides in diversity and specialization (31). For all intents and purposes, two sub-categories of the media, journalism and advertising, will be featured and their particularistic ethical standards will be analyzed.

The public outlook on each profession

Before the journalism and advertising are broken down to their core principles, here is a general comparison of the public's opinion regarding the perceived ethical standards of each. According to a Gallup poll conducted in November 2008, advertising professionals are given a "low/very low" honesty and ethics rating by 38 percent of those surveyed. In comparison, journalism skewed towards a "neutral" honesty and ethics rating, with 44 percent of the population responding in that manner. Overall, Americans see journalists as more honest and ethical with 25 percent of respondents voting in the "very high/high" category compared to the 10 percent given to advertising practitioners. These results did not buck a trend, the numbers provided by Gallup have been fairly consistent throughout the years. It clearly shows that advertising is one of the least trusted professions in American society. To provide a comparison, an advertising practitioner is placed in the same group as car salesmen, stockbrokers and lobbyists. Nurses topped the rankings, with the American public giving them a score of 85 percent in the "very high/high" honesty and ethics category.

The question arises, how did these results happen? It can be posed that because American's are inundated with advertisements daily they find them and those who make them annoying. From the New York Time's article, "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad," by Louise Story, the average number of advertisements seen daily is close to 5,000 — that number is a huge increase from 30 years ago, when a person living in a busy city could see up to 2,000 ads per day. The permeation of advertisements into our society can be seen as a nuisance, which may be a factor in the Gallup polls results. The public may see news media as a more

restrained and controlled entity within our society, which may have lead to a more positive account. In the end, there are many factors that can be accounted for these survey results.

Varying standards between professions

The standards of journalism and advertising are fundamentally different because the professions serve different functions to society. The news media is expected to observe and report the truth, thus the news that they disseminate is believed to be true. On the flip side, advertising is an inherently biased profession. Day writes that advertisers and public relations practitioners “are in the business of persuading.” With these functional differences, the standards for ethics are bound to be different. Since the news media is meant to inform, the manipulation and fabrication of facts, data and sources are highly punishable offenses. In contrast, advertising is meant to persuade. In a society that views up to 5,000 advertisements a day, the bare minimum is not enough. This creates the need for a brand to stand out; this competitive mentality often leads an advertising practitioner to utilize selective truth, or in other words, carefully choosing a message — that is a luxury the news media does not have.

Different connotations of one concept

None of this is to say that journalism and advertising share nothing in common. Here is a case where one overarching concept bridges the two areas together. When looking at the code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Advertising Federation, the most important concept common between the two is truth.

The SPJ code of ethics calls for a journalist to “seek the truth and report it.” Simply put, news must be truth — it is the backbone of a credibility. If there is one standard to follow in the news media, it is that the reporting is fair, balanced and honest. Any deviation from truth can put

a journalist, and their employer, at risk. Day states that “credibility is a fragile commodity and....our faith in credibility as an energizing force must remain undiminished because the fact remains that a lack of trust can be deleterious to both individuals and corporate enterprises” (11). With such a fragile force bonding the audience’s relationship with a news outlet, it would be in the best interest to maintain and uphold the value of truth.

Meanwhile, the AAF’s code of ethics states that “advertising shall reveal truth and shall reveal significant facts, the omission of which would mislead the public.” This standard is where things get slithery; In a speech written by Chris Moore of world-wide advertising conglomerate Ogilvy & Mather, he says that advertising must tell truth but it does not necessarily have to give the “whole truth.” This means that an ad depicting a McDonald’s Big Mac hamburger doesn’t have to explicitly state the amount of calories the hamburger has, but it does have to make the information accessible in some way. The problem with this is where is the line drawn between what goes into an advertisement and what gets thrown to the wayside. Moore emphasizes that an advertising practitioner must make their client look as good as possible, so the potential for ethical dilemmas is much higher than people think.

The real question is, “how important is truth to each profession?” Which upholds the value of truth higher than the other? If the Gallup polls had a say in it, they would give the edge to journalism. This is because the news media values truth above all else, whether it hurts or not, it has to be reported, written or talked about. In advertising, certain truths must be disclosed, but that does not mean everything will be said about a given product or service. He is saying that some truths are more important than others, but he is not denying the virtue of credibility. Moore

says that “the cost of being caught out [in a lie] is simply too high. It can take years to undo damage.”

A comparison of standards from professionals

Ethics means different things to different people. Great minds think alike on general concepts, but as things get more specific and diverse, everyone holds their own opinion. These are the views of professionals within either journalism or advertising and public relations:

Steve Buttry, a communication specialist with credentials in many publications, said in a recent speaking engagement at Texas Christian University that the standard of accuracy in journalism is one of its most important elements and it will stand the test of time. “The core values of journalism do not change because the tools are changing,” Buttry said. “The standard of accuracy still remains — we want stories right and we want it verified.”

Another news-oriented respondent, Victor Nguyen, a former reporter for KFDX 3 in Wichita Falls, Texas and current producer at KDFW 4 in Dallas, finds the news media’s imperative to gathering and reporting truth is the main standard that sets the two disciplines apart. “In journalism, your main dedication is to the truth and spreading truth,” Nguyen said. “We have to deal with it more thoroughly. In advertising, it’s all about picking and choosing what you want to tell your audience, but hiding facts and figures in news reporting makes it a lot easier to get accosted.”

From the advertising realm, Kelsey Mize, director of Fort Worth marketing agency Zag IMC, sees advertising as a business that relies much more on relationships, which requires the standard of truth to be upheld as well. “Reporters have a rapport with their sources,” Mize said. “An account executive like me has to micro-manage so many relationships that ethical dilemmas

are bound to happen.” Mize sees the standard of truth in journalism as an imperative, but also sees truthful and honest communication to clients as an important part of a advertising practitioner’s job.

While Mize’s opinion reflects the account side of advertising, Doug Mangold, a veteran art director of GCG Marketing in Fort Worth, touches base on the creative side. Mangold sees the concept of selective truth as partially correct. “Yeah, you want to make your client look good, but the information that is omitted or thrown to the fine print is usually not important enough to be included anyways,” Mangold said. “It’s not like we try to hurt consumers by leaving putting something like, ‘please don’t try this at home,’ in the fine print. As a creative, I’ve had to water down messages, but I believe the average consumer is smart enough to realize those things.”

Given the time, each person had something different to say about their profession, but each revealed that truth is one of, if not, the most important components in their career. Without truth, there is chaos. Though it seems like journalism and advertising are complete opposites, they do share the principle of truth — but it is up to the moral agent as to how they uphold it.

In the end

Journalism and advertising remain separate entities within the realm of media. This is because each of them possess a different function to society. A journalist reports to inform an audience while an advertising practitioner works to persuade an audience. Though each of these fields carry inherent difference, they are bound by truth. Honesty and integrity are shown differently by each profession, but when everything is boiled down, the truth will prevail. Deceit and lies pave the fast track to failure.