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# Professionalism and Myths in Covering Conflict

Tinatina Tsomaia, M.A.  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Assistant Professor of Journalism  
Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management  
Georgian Institute of Public Affairs  
Tbilisi, Georgia

**Abstract:** *This research analyzes whether journalists when covering the conflicts in Georgia applied four principles found in the profession's Code of Ethics, which outline that journalists should: a) seek the truth and report it as fully as possible; b) act independently; c) minimize harm; and d) be accountable. The purpose of the study was to understand how journalists would act when faced with certain ethical dilemmas when covering conflict. It also sought to examine what expectations the readership would have of journalists in such situations. The research methodology consisted of developing five hypothetical scenarios, each involving an ethical dilemma for a journalist, adapted from real case studies from the Caucasus region. These scenarios were posed to both journalists (news creators) and readers (news consumers), who were asked to identify from a number of possible responses to the ethical dilemma which decision a journalist should (in theory) and probably would (in reality) make, and asked to explain their choice.*

## Introduction

According to eminent journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information that they need to be free and self-governing. (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Journalism that does not aim for these objectives undermines democratic culture. For example, when a government controls the news, something not unknown in Georgia and in part due to the conflicts, the media often becomes one of the front lines in the information war. Journalists serve as the moral agents of societies. They act as watchdogs, as well as active collectors and disseminators of information (Deuze, 2005). Moreover, their job entails certain obligations and their goal, specifically they must seek the truth and communicate it to the world, and this can be a difficult task. As stated by Donald Shriver (1998), it can be challenging for journalists to make the right decisions in the right situations due to both internal and external factors. Decision making about media coverage does not depend solely on motivational factors (Brehmer & Hammond, 1977). There are many internal and external factors that can influence decision making. Nonetheless, journalists cannot rely only on internal moral reasoning. Ethical principles are based on something more than common sense. They are based on principles that are rooted in professional duties and an understanding of the potential consequences of journalists' actions.

In the early 1990s, journalists at the Poynter Institute, a non-profit journalism training center, began using three guiding principles as the foundation of the "doing ethics" process. These principles and the "doing ethics" process were at the heart of the Doing Ethics in Journalism handbook authored by Jay Black, Bob Steele and Ralph Barney for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). In the mid-1990s, SPJ used these principles along with a fourth principle as the cornerstone of a revised Code of Ethics, which outlined that journalists should: a) seek the truth and report it as fully as possible; b) act independently; c) minimize harm; and d) be accountable.

This research analyzes whether journalists when covering the conflicts in Georgia applied these four principles. The purpose of the study was to understand how journalists would act when faced with certain ethical dilemmas when covering conflict. It also sought to examine what expectations the readership would have of journalists in such situations. The research methodology consisted of developing five hypothetical scenarios, each involving an ethical dilemma for a journalist, adapted from real case studies from the Caucasus region. These scenarios were posed to both journalists (news creators) and readers (news consumers), who were asked to identify from a number of possible responses to the ethical dilemma which decision a journalist should (in theory) and probably would (in reality) make, and asked to explain their choice.

On the one hand, the study found that the majority of respondents identified journalistic ethics and Western professional standards as the most crucial attributes for covering conflicts in a fair manner. Of these principles, telling the facts and verification of information were identified as the most important principles. However, the majority of respondents acknowledged that coverage of conflict in Georgia often failed to live up to these standards and could be misleading, inaccurate and extremely partisan. One of the main reasons for this was self-censorship, necessitated by self-preservation, as most journalists could be sacked from their jobs by going against the editorial line, which more often than not prioritized national interests over professional responsibility. At the same time, while some journalists identified fear of losing their job as one reason for self-censorship, other journalists believed that at times of national crisis, they would not wish to highlight vulnerabilities on 'their' side of the conflict which might help the 'enemy'. Thus, some journalists would voluntarily subjugate professional standards to their personal convictions and justify their approach in terms of national interests.

These findings demonstrate how challenging it can be to apply ethical journalistic standards when covering one's own conflict, both because the risks are higher and because it is harder for journalists to be truly independent and impartial.

### **Research Methodology**

The findings presented in this report are based on several research components. Desk research implies that the researcher has reviewed the literature about Georgia's media ethics codes-normative documents and dynamics of their implementation in the country. Field Research involves interviews with 16 media professionals: journalists working for the local (1 person) and international media companies (5), media managers (2), press officers (1) and media program coordinators working at international organizations (2) and academics and professionals (6) specializing in journalism, political, media, and social studies. The semi-structured interviews implied a questionnaire concerning 5 situations containing ethical dilemmas and possible solutions to these dilemmas. The hypothetical situations were modeled after the real situations journalists faced in the Caucasus region (applicable to Georgia). The situations were elaborated based upon the literature review and a preliminary survey of 10 media professionals (journalists, editors). The respondents were asked to rate the journalistic responses to each of the situation.

The interviews were conducted in September 2011. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and one hour, and were conducted by a principle researcher and research assistant. This activity focused on Tbilisi. The respondents were asked to provide views, firstly on how journalists take decisions concerning ethical issues within the society and secondly, their own opinion on how these decisions ought to be taken. After the respondents had familiarized themselves with the scenario for each case and the various responses to it, presented in the questionnaire, they had to give their rating of the extent to which they approved or did not approve of the action described. There was a

rating scale following the description of each action, from 1 (I do not approve at all) to 10 (I fully approve). How, in respondent's opinion, decisions were actually taken in most cases. A separate rating scale was also provided in which 1 (totally unlikely), 10 (very likely). Respondents had to select the response that most closely matched with their views. Only one option was possible in each table and the same score could be used twice. When answering each question respondents were asked to bear in mind that researcher was asking how a journalist from their society would behave. At the end of each case, respondents were also giving the reasons for the rating, explaining why would they or others act in the one way or differently.

The cross-tabulation of four different perspectives, journalists, media experts, media consumer experts, and society, added to their free remarks allowed the researchers to make interesting conclusions about the tendencies in the society that are summarized in the findings and conclusions of the study.

## Study Findings

### Desk Research – Media Ethics Situation in Georgia

Several attempts have taken place since Soviet Union's collapse to introduce media ethics standards in the country, but an efficient journalism accountability system has not yet been developed. The first code was developed by the Independent Association of Georgian Journalists in 2000 and adopted in 2001. In 2002, as part of a Liberty Institute initiative and with coordination by representatives of NGOs and media outlets, the Professional Standards of Media was developed. Only some media outlets have adopted this standard as a code of ethics. Others have refused to adhere to these standards, saying that the standards challenged their freedom of expression as they bore a potential to restrict the practice of journalists as demonstrated in some cases in some countries when ethics codes were treated as if they were laws (International Center for Journalists, 2003).

The Parliament of Georgia adopted the Law on the Freedom of Speech and Expression in 2004. The law instituted a number of innovations such as decriminalizing libel. The 2008 IREX Media Sustainability Index described Georgian media legislation as "liberal and progressive, yet poorly applied." The Media Council, a body for self-regulation and accountability aimed at protecting media professional standards, was formed in 2005, but currently does not function, because its members did not pay membership fees. A number of leading newspapers, established an alternative Press Council in 2005, soon also stopped functioning.

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) adopted the Broadcasters' Code of Conduct in 2009. The code includes recommendations and necessary norms. Transparency International termed the effort an "obligatory system of self-regulation," as television companies were supposed to enforce the code themselves by establishing in-house self-regulatory mechanisms, including mechanisms to handle complaints. However, the GNCC has the right to take measures should an outlet fail to address complaints. Regional journalists assembled around the Charter of Ethics of Georgian Journalists in December 2009. This became a functioning regulatory body, partly inner directed, as many journalists have united around the charter under certain principles. But it is not a self-sustainable body and operates by grants. Additionally, some media outlets have developed their own professional ethics guidelines, including the Public Broadcaster, Brosse Street Journal, and Kutaisi P.S.

Currently, a citizen can complain about a violation of norms of conduct by a media company to two bodies, a self-regulatory board formed within television companies and the Charter of Ethics of Georgian Journalists. However, the category of those who can submit complaints is limited because the charter council considers only the complaints against charter member journalists. Because of these restrictions, the number of complaints to both bodies is minimal, while media outlets violate the norms quite often. According to data provided by the Charter of Ethics of Georgian Journalists, from 2010 until 2012, 13 complaints were analyzed.

According to a Transparency International report, while the country has mostly progressive and liberal laws governing the establishment and operation of media entities, in practice the media remain less transparent, accountable, and independent. Most probably, the answer is not only in written ethical rules and written laws in itself, but adoption and internalization of these rules. According to the same report the media self-regulation system in Georgia is outside driven. NGOs under the influence of donor organizations were giving directions to media representatives for what should they do and how they should behave. The media was not eager to act in accordance with codes written by the NGO community. The demand among the media to make a sustainable independent organization that will be supported by membership still does not exist.

Those who were in charge of developing a Georgian ethics system were trying to make it quickly, but this time pressure limited participation of the media actors in the process of development and internalization of ethical rules. The result was that the elaborated mechanisms lacked the necessary respect from the side of media actors. The majority of national television channels do not put the information about self-regulatory mechanism on their web sites, clearly indicating that the system is not transparent enough to the public. This behavior explains that media is not interested in promoting the process. They are only involved in it because of the State regulation.

Public media literacy is another significant factor contributing to a weak media accountability system in Georgia. The public is not aware of what to demand, and thus people have not assumed a watchdog role that controls the everyday performance of media.

Ethics exist to provide guidelines, but decision making relies solely on individuals. At the same time, awareness of journalists about ethics remains a key factor in the practice of ethical standards. Ethics should be a significant part of the journalism education. Quality journalism education provides a foundation on which further practice is built, but this is not happening in Georgia. There are limited number of programs teaching in accordance to Western journalism standards.

A healthy and well-developed advertising sector is the key to a strong and sustainable media sector and a competitive business environment, which is not the case in Georgia. A report by Transparency International Georgia states that the Georgian advertising sector is characterized by a lack of competition and dominated by a small network of friends and business partners with ties to influential authority such as a former defense minister. Therefore, the media is politicized and journalists working for such media in the environment where independent editorial policy does not exist, become a part of propaganda.

### **Field Research**

The discussion below is structured according to four ethical principles (seek the truth and report it as fully as possible, act independently, minimize harm, be accountable) and five ethical

dilemmas they produce to show the factors which facilitate or limit Georgian journalists' compliance to these principles. Although all five dilemmas require adherence to all four principles at some time, some of the principles are more sound for particular a case. Specifically, "seek the truth and report it as fully as possible" is related to the first case, the second and the fourth cases are analyzed in relation to "act independently" principle, the third case is analyzed in accordance to "be accountable" principle and the fifth case relates to principle to "minimize harm."

### **Seek the Truth and Report It as Fully as Possible.**

The given ethical principle requires that journalists have the courage to be fair and objective in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. At the same time, there are number of factors which prevent journalists from implementation of this principle in their daily professional practice. Among such external factors is the editor or owner, who may ask the journalist to carry out the task that is in conflict with the above mentioned principles. Should the journalist follow the professional standard, which obliges him to be loyal to citizens, or should he obey the order and carry out the task? Even when the legal framework and regulations are encouraging journalist to fulfill his obligations, external pressure such as financial and national interests might carry more weight. According to the Code of Conduct of Broadcasters of Georgia, a broadcaster must refrain from using staged footage and simulations in newsfeeds and public political shows, or should clearly state that it is a simulation. Broadcasters should not mislead the audience by manipulating visual and audio footage, changing meaning of asked questions, or by using footage out of context. Being guided through these recommendations what would a journalist do when the order comes from above? These are the issues for discussion in the following case:

**Case1:** On the anniversary of the war an editor is told by the proprietor of a television channel to commission journalists to prepare an item to remind viewers about the war and the threats that can be expected from the opposing side. The journalist is expected to use old war clips of bombings, troop incursions, military action and anti-government speeches by political opposition leaders. The journalist is expected to design the news item so that it is not clear that the events presented in the piece have already occurred and are in the past, in fact they are presented as if they are happening in the present. The broadcast is to be a simulation, to show what might happen if enemy troops attack again. In the event of an incursion the enemy troops will overthrow the ruling government with the assistance of the political opposition and the country will be diverted from its chosen political course, etc. (For the versions of the possible responses from the side of journalists to this dilemma included into questionnaire, see appendix A).

When asked about their opinion on this dilemma, all interviewed experts in Georgia thought they should adhere to journalistic professional standards and give only an accurate picture of reality that does not mislead the audience. All media experts were speaking in one voice and there was no different point of view between journalists and media consumers. All 16 respondents did not approve the journalists' involvement in lies (simulation) under any circumstances. But there is a significant contradiction between what media experts thought about how journalists should behave and how they believed that journalists actually behave. According to all interviewed experts, the majority of journalists would first of all think about personal interests, in a case of receiving a task to make a simulated news item. When deciding upon the dilemma, they would be more likely to think about their own interests and image, or financial and legal security of a media outlet which again, are indirectly related to personal interests of a journalist. Respondents were mostly critical of the motive "to behave in regards to the fair of losing job," while they thought it is the widest spread among journalists (see Appendix A, Figure 1, Choice 1,1).

According to all interviewed experts, the majority of journalists would not take an active position to speak publicly about their problems. Twelve experts agreed with these journalists as they do not approve a journalist having an active position and publicizing of the dispute with an editor, for instance by organizing a press-conference. Twelve out of 16 interviewed experts thought that any form of activism is not advisable for journalists, as it questions the independence and nonpartisanship and therefore it could not serve the principles of truth and justice. According to all of the interviewed experts, journalists completely ignore the level of societal trauma while covering Georgian society. Experts believed that when it is about covering of conflicts, journalists should be knowledgeable about trauma reporting and be aware of the possible harm that the report could cause, especially in Georgia, a country with a society that has undergone several conflicts. According to the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, whether the topic is street crime, family violence, natural disaster, war or human rights, effective news reporting on traumatic events demands knowledge, skill and support ([www.dartcenter.org](http://www.dartcenter.org)).

### **Act Independently.**

In Case 2 the questions to discuss included the following. Would a journalist be prepared to report the truth about violence and brutality committed by his country's army during the war even if this will cost him being left without a job and being acted against aggressively? Should a journalist take into account the public interest to information? Should a journalist be driven by the motive of promoting peace? Should a journalist publicize information even if it may endanger his life? Would reporting the truth result in weakening the enemy image and promote sympathy to an enemy?

**Case 2:** A journalist who did not report events during the war itself obtains partial information about what happened through the media. On this basis, he knows that soldiers from his side showed courage in battle to protect his country. He also knows that most of the losses were borne by his side and not that of the attacker. He knows that there are practically no civilian victims on the enemy's side, while many on his side suffered (were killed, wounded, people's houses were burnt down and they were left without shelter). After the conflict, he visits the buffer zone that the enemy population abandoned during the military action and discovers that some of the villages in the buffer zone were completely destroyed. Talking to the representatives of the other side, he discovers that the civilian population here suffered badly, many perished, and the others, in order to save themselves, moved away and left their homes, which were subsequently bulldozed.

The results showed that all experts believed that the primary role of a journalist was to report facts. That is what they expected from journalists, but their expectations, according to their reports, were not met. All experts agreed that covering war in one's own country is a complicated situation which raises significant dilemmas for a journalist. At the same time, they concluded that it was difficult, but possible. Journalists who have had years of experience in covering war and conflict via international media (5 out of the interviewed journalists) stressed that reporting on violent conduct by an army of one's own country is not a problem. They have truthfully reported on wars in other countries as well as in their own countries many times, guided by the Western journalistic principles.

Those who worked for local media were less uncompromising. "I remember myself during the war; I was really far from journalism then. Working in compliance with professional standard remains the biggest dilemma for me when it comes to reporting your own war; all the predispositions and sentiments must be put aside, which is very hard," said one. One media expert doubted the effectiveness of using Western standards of journalism when it comes to covering war

in one's own country. "It is not surprising for me when Western, universal standards of journalism are left behind when you really want your country just to survive," she said. "I have often thought why it is so problematic to act according to the Western, mainly American, standards when covering war; probably because the USA often fights in other countries. It should be possible to cover wars in Viet Nam and Iraq, but it is not that easy when war is under way in your own country, in your own home. Although American soldiers were being killed in Viet Nam and Iraq, journalists at least did not worry that the next day their homes, or families would also be gone," said another expert.

According to the experts, fear of losing the job drove most journalists in Georgia to hide the truth (see Appendix A, Figure 2, Choice 2.2). The next most prominent reason was the loyalty to national interests. According to one expert, knowing the truth will help the society to analyze the mistakes made in order to fix them in the future and will also insure government's accountability to the public. According to another respondent, "Reconciliation of people and peace-building are not journalistic duties and this must be well understood by all. Journalists often believe they have a specific mission, besides reporting fairly, which is an absolutely wrong approach this is wrong in both cases-when the motivation is peace building or acting due to national interests."

All 16 experts were very critical about misreporting due to the so-called national interests (see Appendix A, Figure 2, Choice 2.7). Patriotic sentiments among journalists are partially explained by the influence of public opinion and existing demand for such sentiments. Experts believed that there is no demand towards high quality, facts-based, objective journalistic coverage in Georgia among the general public. One of the experts explained this by citing the people's wish to believe in the progress that country has achieved in joining European and Western institutions, and they do not want to hear truth that contradicts this perception.

The experts were less negative when it came to the threat to journalists' lives due to reporting the truth (see Appendix A, Figure 2, Choice 2.9). The opinions of experts differed on this issue in which 14 respondents said that there is a big difference between sustaining a job and staying alive while only some experts who have covered the war and are working for the international media said that when a journalist agrees to cover a conflict, he understands the risks and is ready to sacrifice his life to the cause.

Another reason for non-objective coverage, according to the experts, was fear of being punished. All interviewed experts believed journalists would be punished by being imprisoned for circulating information which is against national interests in Georgia (see Appendix A, Figure 2, Choice 2.8). They said law enforcers would do everything possible to create legal problems for such a journalist. Two out of 16 experts believed that a journalist could be murdered for reporting the truth and damaging national interests in Georgia, depending on the importance of the revealed information.

Case 3 combined some parts from all four principles. It requested that the journalist stay independent from his own emotions. The journalist's job is to bear witness to history, not participate in it. By pitching in to help, the journalists would compromise their objectivity and place themselves as actors in a situation which they should be describing and observing. The principle "seek the truth and report it as fully as possible" requires a journalist to distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Under the principle "be accountable" a Journalist needs to clarify and explain news coverage, and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct. Does pitching in to help compromise notions of objectivity and impartiality? It can be difficult to explain to the public why journalist did not intervene and saved a person's life when he was capable of doing so. Does this basic tenet of not intervening make a reporter inhuman?

**Case 3:** During the war a group of international journalists are reporting events from the battle sites. One side is totally defeated with huge human and material losses. The victorious side has set up roadblocks everywhere. One international and neutral journalist (he comes from your society) gets the material he needs and leaves the devastated area. On the road he comes across two people from the defeated side wearing military uniform. One has been injured in the leg and blood is pouring from the wound. With them are a boy of about five years old and his mother (close relatives of the injured man – his sister and his niece). They ask the journalist to take them in his car to a safe place and rescue them from possible death.

This case considers the following questions. Does the professional standard make a journalist refuse to act humanely in a critical situation? Is a journalist a human or a professional in the first place? How compatible are professionalism and humanity? When there is a choice, should a journalist save a human life, or a journalistic material? Is it important by what motives drives a person (personal interest, or public interest) when making a decision, or taking a certain action?

Seven out of 16 interviewed respondents found it difficult to assess all the solutions offered to this dilemma; no one took an absolutist stance that journalists should never help under any circumstances. Some seemed deeply conflicted about when to intervene, but media experts and media consumer experts had provided answers from different angles. Media experts perceived the journalist's job as serving witness to history, not participating in it. According to this judgment, by pitching in to help, the journalists would compromise their objectivity and insert themselves as actors in a situation. "I have been convinced many times that my human apprehension of humanity differs from journalistic apprehension of humanity," said one respondent who works for an international media company.

For media consumer experts saving human lives is simply the right thing to do, regardless of the professional ramifications and only after that they should they continue to accomplish their media duties. Media experts talked about some professional specifics. According to the journalist respondents with working experience at international media organizations, in most of the cases journalistic standards require not acting in favor of saving a human life. Nevertheless, according to one of the reporters, in such cases a universal recipe does not work and individual approach is necessary. "I think you can get involved as a human being when your own conscience tells you to, if such intention comes out of the scene," one respondent said. According to another journalist, who works at an international media company, "Professionalism makes you to think and when you think you realize that you should not take anyone with you, when there is a threat that not only them, but [that] you also can be killed with those people." Still another indicated, "When it comes to human life all the professional standards go back. Still, it depends on what kind of material you are bringing back from war. If your material can save thousands of human lives, it would not be easy to give it up." Media consumer experts could not provide the details, but they also justify more dealings for saving a human life. "I would never hesitate when it comes to human life. In that case I do not care about the material. The dilemma is that I may sacrifice lives of other people to the life of one soldier." All media experts agree on the trends of behavior among journalists in such cases. They presume that majority of journalists will give preference to saving a human life.

### **Be Accountable.**

According to the "be accountable" principle," journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers, and one another. In line with this principle, The SPJ Code of Ethics, the code of the nation's largest organization of news professionals, says journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage, and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

**Case 4:** It is the first days of the war. The journalist receives information from the media on the horrors of the war in which his side is the victim: bombing, destruction, the misery of people left without homes, forced resettlement. He also receives information from his source from the opposite side that his side has killed hundreds of thousands of enemy civilians.

The following questions are considered with this case. Should a journalist publish unverified controversial information? What if this information is about thousands of casualties? What if this is misinformation? What effect would it have? Should a journalist apologize for misinformation and make a correction?

Eleven out of 16 interviewed experts give the highest assessment to verification of information and reporting of verified facts (see Appendix A, Figure 4, Choice 4.4). Two types of opinions have been identified on the given dilemma. First, according to 5 experts (4 worked for international media, one was media consumer), it is necessary to circulate the information, but indicate in the report, that the information has not been yet verified and that the verification process is under way. another 11 experts thought that only verified information should be distributed. "The information sources that were trusted before cannot be trusted any more during war. Journalists should report only what they saw, and even such information needs verification. I have seen people making up news during a conflict just because of the orders received," one respondent said.

Falsification of information and concealing, or correcting it due to so-called national interests is categorically unacceptable for all the interviewed experts. Although, according to the same experts, journalists in reality mainly act according to the given reason (see Appendix A, Figure 4 Choice 4.5). Respondents explained that journalists might hide information received from opposing sources if it opposes the myth that "our side can only be good." "It is not because they are too lazy to verify the information, it is just because they believe that it would not be right for people to hear about own side that during war," one respondent said.

According to 15 experts apologizing for publishing inaccurate information is respected. It is noteworthy that experts justify their apology and correction by journalists within the framework of professional standards. Apologizing at the right time is considered professionalism and it will not harm a journalist's career. All 16 experts negatively judged any attempt by a journalist to mislead society and not admit a mistake has been made and advise journalists not to practice such behavior (see Appendix A, Figure 4.1, Choice 4.1.4).

### **Minimize Harm.**

According to this given principle, ethical journalists treat sources, subjects, and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. That admonition is no small challenge in a profession that often demands assertive behavior and split-second decision making in the pursuit of truth and the disseminating of information. Minimizing harm is difficult to accomplish when reporting on a

tragedy, when accusing public officials of wrongdoing or when publishing or broadcasting unpleasant news about society.

**Case 5:** ‘Compromising’ video footage of the prime minister’s brother comes into the hands of the journalist. The video recording clearly shows the prime minister’s brother holding business talks with government representatives from the other side in the conflict. The newspaper has already been accused on more than one occasion of being excessively critical of the government.

The following questions were given consideration in this case. Do personal predispositions and attitudes interfere with, or support the professional activities of a journalist and how it is possible to set free from them? What is self-censorship and to what extent is it justified when covering a conflict?

According to all experts it is always necessary publicize the case. Concealing or improving information is categorically unacceptable, both due to self-censorship, or peace-promotion motives. According to the survey the so called “self-censorship” is the most spread behavior among journalists (see Appendix A, Figure 5, Choice 5.5). The issue of reliability of the video footage appeared to be the most contradictory. Some experts claimed it was not justified to publish the footage without verification while others said video footage had to be presented as a fact with necessary attributes. A third group of experts believed it necessary to make conduct an analysis and consider the context. Some said “the journalist must show the video footage without any interpretation and attributes.” One indicated that, “Video footage may be edited and very important information may be cut out which would change the context. Such footage needs to be verified, clarified, but when it is not possible to do so then the information must be published by stating that the info has not been verified and shows a person, who looks like Prime Minister’s brother.” According to one respondent: “As in Georgia it is a common practice that law enforcers often publish hidden video footages, journalists must always be skeptical of such materials and try to verify why such footage became available to them and think about the effect of its circulation.”

The fifth case brought up the issue of polarization of Georgian media. According to respondents, it would be more expected that national television channels would not air such video footage, while the so called opposition media outlets would with high probability. Accordingly, if the similar footage would be about one of opposition leaders the so called governmental media would immediately, without any verification broadcast it. The majority of respondents (14) did not justify partial approach by journalists under any circumstances (see Appendix A, Figure 5, Choice 5.5). “Inner sympathy or hatred to politicians is a serious problem. Journalists cannot be forgiven for personal sympathy. They must always be critical to politicians,” said one respondent.

### Conclusion

The findings withdrawn from the conducted interviews are restricted to the media expert community and are merely indicative of what those questioned say they believe. However, together with the desk review, this study examines the Georgian media landscape. First of all, there is an intensive movement towards elaboration of ethical standards in the country. At the same time, the process of elaboration has some shortcomings which restrict compliance with the elaborated standards, namely, it is driven “from the outside” or let us say, donor-driven. It is very quick and not participatory enough; it does not pay attention to rising awareness among journalist of the standards and neither pays attention to the increasing public awareness of the standards. It does

not pay enough attention to the media market and does not work on creation of demand for ethical journalism among society/communities etc.

In the opinion of the leading media experts in the country, both among media professionals and media consumer experts, there is clear recognition of the importance of adhering to professional standards while covering conflict among expert community. All interviewed experts named journalistic ethics and Western professional standards as the most crucial attributes for covering conflicts fairly. Truth telling and verification of information were most important. But the difference was found between those experts who work for international and local media. Those who worked for international media companies and therefore for international audiences said they have followed the guidelines and have practically covered the war truthfully by putting aside patriotic sentiments, while media experts working for local audiences found it more difficult. This could be partially explained by the insufficient demand from the general public towards high quality, fact-based objective journalistic coverage in Georgia.

Interviewed experts perceived the Georgian media as polarized along the pro-government/oppositional lines which plays an important role in disseminating information. This conclusion is explained by having an aim to be negative towards state policy, since having an oppositional media will with higher probability air news stories that are considered more anti-nationalistic, but that decision will be more politically-driven rather than being professional or ethical. Although on the one hand media polarization could be considered a reflection of a polarization of Georgian society itself, according to experts, it does not serve the interests of the society, as the decisions are not taken in order to serve it.

Coverage of conflict is misleading, inaccurate, and extremely partisan and the reason for that is self-censorship, which is caused by financial dependence and prioritizing national interests over professional responsibility. According to the respondents, journalists in Georgia, when reporting on conflict situations, give priority to their self-interests and their own well-being rather than to upholding the ethical standards of journalism. Factors such as government pressure, ownership policy, low salaries, according to the respondents' opinions, negatively affect the quality of journalism and, therefore, establishment of a free society.

At the same time ethical decisions involve personal action; these are the things journalists need to change themselves, whatever pressure exists from the outside. The conclusion is that journalists who thoroughly follow the highest standard, earn power that helps them to withstand the external factors that restrict the freedom of the press.

The legal framework in Georgia in which liberal legislation introduced ethical codes of conduct, creates a supportive environment for journalists to practice Western journalism standards while covering conflict. This is true because when rules are introduced, one can follow them. The converse is also true—when there are no rules, there is no necessity to follow them. However, simply having written rules does not guarantee that they will be followed. An accountable media system does not exist, and it can only work if a legal framework, media self-regulation, and public control are well balanced against the other aspects, which is not the case in Georgia.

According to all interviewed experts, the fair coverage of the war, both far from their country and covering war within their own country, is possible if journalists are committed to Western journalism standards. But it is more challenging to apply these standards to cover war in a journalist's own country because the risks are higher which means that the lives of journalists' family members, many of their friends, and citizens are endangered. In situations where the journalists'

own country and home can be bombed and destroyed, it is harder for local journalists to be independent and impartial.

Experts slightly disagree on the role of journalists in the situation in which they must decide whether to give first priority to saving human lives or to fulfilling their professional responsibilities as journalists. All experts generally supported the lifesaving position, but media experts and media consumer experts view the role of journalist differently. Media experts perceived the journalist's job as serving by informing, not participating in it. According to such judgment, by pitching in to help, the journalists would compromise their objectivity and insert themselves as actors in a situation. For media consumer experts, saving human is simply the right thing to do, regardless of the professional ramifications. But even those who have worked for the international organizations, with significant experience of covering war said that humanity does not conflict with professional standards. The ability to empathize with pain and suffering, makes the journalist a better journalist. There are cases when a universal recipe does not work and journalists can get involved as a human being when their own conscience tells them to do so.

All the interviewed experts had some experience in working with international organizations or were Western educated or actually have worked for the international media organization. This explains their very clear stand for Western professional standards while covering conflict. As a recommendation, the study can conclude, that the best way to practice ethical journalism is to work at the international media organizations, where the ethical decision making process is strong and has its history and tradition and is supported by the owners and most importantly by the public itself. When there is public policy and a public watchdog controlling and monitoring the everyday media practice and demanding from the media fair and accurate coverage, the media becomes more responsible.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was conducted within the project run by International Alert as part of the "Myths and Conflict in the South Caucasus." I would like to acknowledge help and guidance from Darejan Javakhishvili, project director. I am thankful to Tamar Mshvenieradze for helping me in the processes of obtaining and analyzing data.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire

#### Case 1

On the anniversary of the war an editor is told by the proprietor of a television channel to commission journalists to prepare an item to remind viewers about the war and the threats that can be expected from the opposing side. The journalist is expected to use old war clips of bombings, troop incursions, military action and anti-government speeches by political opposition leaders. The journalist is expected to design the news item so that it is not clear that the events presented in the piece have already occurred and are in the past, in fact, they are presented as if they are happening in the present.

The broadcast is to be a simulation to show what might happen if enemy troops attack again, that perhaps in the event of an incursion the enemy troops will overthrow the ruling government with the assistance of the political opposition, the country will be diverted from its chosen political course, etc.

#### Figure 1.

Numbers in describe the cumulative answers of media experts based on their responses to interviews in relation to each case.

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

#### Choices for Experts and Journalists.

- 1.1 The journalist carries out the task since he does not dare to disobey his boss's order out of a fear of losing his job.
- 1.2 The journalist carries out the task since he thinks it is necessary to remind the public of the horrors of war, of the possibility that the events could be repeated at any moment and of the threats facing the country at this moment; He thinks that the people should hear the truth even if it is rather unpalatable.
- 1.3 The journalist carried out the task, but against his boss's orders tries to emphasize as much as possible that the news item is invented and the clips are selective, since he thinks it is important to remind people but it is also necessary to respect people's dignity and take into account [potential effects on their mental] health.
- 1.4 The journalist does not carry out the task since the report could cause panic, and resigns his job since he is concerned about effects on the mental health of the audience.
- 1.5 The journalist does not carry out the task and resigns his job since he thinks that he is insulting the viewers if he does not state whether the report is real or fabricated.

- 1.6 The journalist does not carry out the task and resigns his job since he thinks that the item will be perceived negatively and this will have a negative effect on his professional image.
- 1.7 The journalist does not carry out the task and resigns his job since he thinks that manipulation of this kind is dangerous: the item might anger the public and lead to unpleasant results for the company both legally and commercially.
- 1.8 The journalist does not carry out the task, leaves and holds a press conference saying that the editor tried to force him to manipulate the audience.
- 1.9 Other (please specify)

## **Case 2**

A journalist who did not report events during the war itself obtains partial information about what happened through the media. On this basis he knows that soldiers from his side showed courage in battle with an aggressor to protect his country. He also knows that most of the losses were borne by his side and not that of the attacker. He knows that there are practically no civilian victims on the enemy's side, whilst many on his side suffered (were killed, wounded, people's houses were burnt down and they were left without shelter). After the conflict he visits the buffer zone which the enemy population abandoned during the military action and discovers that some of the villages in the buffer zone were completely destroyed. Talking to the representatives of the other side he discovers that the civilian population here suffered badly, many perished, and the others, in order to save themselves, moved away and left their homes which were subsequently bulldozed.

### **Figure 2.**

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

### **Choices for Experts and Journalists.**

- 2.1 The journalist publishes the material: as soon as he returns he informs the public that the enemy town where military action took place was razed to the ground by his own side's army and the populace's houses were mercilessly bombed, since he thinks his professional duty is to report events objectively.
- 2.2 The journalist is about to publish the material but if he realizes this could cost him his job he abandons the idea since he thinks that although truth is important it is not as important as his job, which supports his family.
- 2.3 The journalist is about to publish the material but if he realizes this could cost him his job he abandons the idea since he thinks that although truth is important it is not as important as his job, without which he cannot inform the public of other important events.
- 2.4 The journalist publishes the material on what he has seen since he thinks that now the war is over it is time to dispel the image of the enemy and to assist in bringing about peace and reconciliation between the conflicting sides and providing truthful information will assist in this.
- 2.5 The journalist prefers to suppress the story since he decides that the public will not believe him in any case.

- 2.6 The journalist prefers to suppress the story since he decides that if he publishes information that is unacceptable/unexpected for the public he is inviting aggression against himself.
- 2.7 The journalist prefers to suppress the story since he decides the public should not be encouraged to have sympathy for the enemy as this would dispel the belligerence which is needed in case a new war breaks out.
- 2.8 The journalist prefers to suppress the story due to a possible threat to his personal safety and even the risk of losing his life. He recalls a number of cases where journalists were killed for reasons that remain unidentified to this day.
- 2.9 Other (please specify)

### **Case 3**

During the war a group of international journalists is reporting events from the battle sites. One side is totally defeated with huge human and material losses. The victorious side has set up roadblocks everywhere. One international and neutral journalist (he comes from your society) gets the material he needs and leaves the devastated area. On the road he comes across two people from the defeated side wearing military uniform. One has been injured in the leg and blood is pouring from the wound. With them are a boy of about five years old and his mother (close relatives of the injured man – his sister and his niece). They ask the journalist to take them in his car to a safe place and rescue them from possible death.

#### **Figure 3.**

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

#### **Choices for Experts and Journalists.**

- 3.1 The journalist refuses since this will put his own life and that of a number of people in danger as well as the footage.
- 3.2 The journalist refuses since he does not want to spoil his relations with the victorious side, as he may have to work on territory belonging to them in future.
- 3.3 The journalist decides to take the risk and take them with him hoping that his car will not be stopped and checked at the roadblocks.
- 3.4 The journalist decides to take the risk and take them with him in spite of the difficulties since for him human life has the highest value.
- 3.5 The journalist administers first aid to the injured man (using the first aid kit in the car) and if it is clear that the wound is not fatal he leaves him and his comrade since if a soldier is found in his car this could be disastrous for everyone and takes the woman and child with him.
- 3.6 Other (please specify)

### **Case 4**

It is the first days of the war. The journalist receives information from the media on the horrors of the war in which his side is the victim: bombing, destruction, the misery of people left without

homes, forced resettlement. He also receives information from his source from the opposite side that his side has killed hundreds of thousands of enemy civilians.

In the cases where the journalist publishes the information, he subsequently learns from reliable sources, some of which are foreign, that the figures given in his publication are false: the actual numbers of victims on his and the enemy side are almost identical and are less than three thousand people.

#### Figure 4.

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

#### Choices for Experts and Journalists.

- 4.1 The journalist publishes this unverified information in an international publication, referring to his information source, since he thinks that he should expose the authorities that are despicably concealing a truth that the people should know about.
- 4.2 The journalist publishes this unverified information in an international publication, referring to his information source, since he thinks that the report will help to stop the fighting: he thinks it is necessary to make peace, and describing the situation from the other point of view will help to dispel the myth that everyone on his side is the same.
- 4.3 The journalist panics, cannot work out what is happening and publishes unverified information in a rush without considering the consequences.
- 4.4 The journalist does not publish the information as he thinks it is unprofessional to publish unverified information since it must be checked for reliability first.
- 4.5 The journalist does not publish the information in foreign media: he deals with the question from the perspective of his country's national interests, avoiding damaging its image in the world, does not report on the killings and destruction and presents one-sided information to the global community, presenting his country as the victim and the enemy country as the aggressor.
- 4.5 Other (please specify)

#### Figure 4.1.

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

#### Choices for Experts and Journalists.

- 4.1.1 The journalist publishes a retraction of his own information in the same international publication, writing that there is no evidence of genocide and apologizing since he thinks that this complies with professional ethics.
- 4.1.2 The journalist publishes a retraction of his own information in the same international publication, writing that there is no evidence of genocide and apologizing since he thinks that publishing false information would be more damaging to his professional career than a public apology.
- 4.1.3 The journalist does not apologize and merely places a publication with the same publishing house in which he shows that rumors spread about genocide were false and backs this up with facts, without mentioning that he himself previously acted on behalf of these rumors, since he thinks that mentioning that he published false information will harm his image in the eyes of his colleagues and so he reverses the damage caused by the false information without exposing his own failures.
- 4.1.4 The journalist does not publish a retraction since this will indicate that he has previously provided the public with unverified information which will harm his reputation, and decides to suppress the story (hoping that the old publication will be forgotten).
- 4.1.5 Other (please specify)

### **Case 5**

'Compromising' video footage of the prime minister's brother comes into the hands of the journalist. The video recording clearly shows the prime minister's brother holding business talks with government representatives from the other side in the conflict. The newspaper has already been accused on more than one occasion of being excessively critical of the government.

#### **Figure 5.**

Based on their own assessment of the situation in the society, respondents (experts) were asked to rate the following choices and the likelihood that most other journalists would also act in a certain way, on a scale from 1-10 such that 1 = I do not agree at all and highly unlikely and 10 = I fully agree and very likely.

Experts	[I do not agree]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[I fully agree]
Journalists	[Highly unlikely]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	[Very likely]

#### **Choices for Experts and Journalists.**

- 5.1 The journalist publishes an article in which he describes in detail everything shown in the video recording since the issue relates to national interests. This will increase public confidence in the paper and it will not be shut down.
- 5.2 The journalist prepares an article in which he describes in detail everything shown in the video recording. To avoid causing problems for his newspaper the journalist publishes the material through some other media outlet even if this costs him his job since he thinks it is his professional duty to write the truth.
- 5.3 The journalist prepares an article in which he describes in detail everything shown in the video recording. To avoid causing problems for his newspaper the journalist publishes the material through some other media outlet since he expects the public to support it and he thinks that his article will cause an outburst of anger leading to the prime minister's resignation.
- 5.4 The journalist refrains from publishing the material and does not write anything for reasons of 'self-censorship'.

- 5.5 The journalist does not publish the material since he himself supports the prime minister's policies. The journalist thinks that relations need to be established with the opposing side and that he will be helping to bring about peace.
- 5.6 The journalist does not publish the material since he wants to double-check the information and have it confirmed by other sources. He will only publish it when he is certain of its reliability.
- 5.7 Other (please specify)

## Appendix 2

This is the extract from the book “The Elements of Journalism” by Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach, clarifying the notion of truth as one of the main principles of journalism.

“Over time journalists have developed nine core principles to meet the task. They comprise what might be described as the theory of journalism. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth. Democracy depends on citizens having reliable, accurate facts put in a meaningful context. Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can--and must--pursue it in a practical sense. This "journalistic truth" is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Even in a world of expanding voices, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built—context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The truth, over time, emerges from this forum. As citizens encounter an ever greater flow of data, they have more need--not less--for identifiable sources dedicated to verifying that information and putting it in context.”

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## Appendix 3

### SPJ Code of Ethics

#### Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of "rules" but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not — nor can it be under the First Amendment — legally enforceable.

#### Seek Truth and Report It as Fully as Possible

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.
- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.

- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

### **Minimize Harm**

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

### **Act Independently**

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know. Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

### **Be Accountable**

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other. Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.

- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others