

Elyssa Fishman and Rachyl Jones

Creating an Ethical News Consumer

The year 2020 will go down in history. It has brought a pandemic, a new wave of social justice protests, a controversial election and most notably, an ostensible rock bottom for trust in news outlets. Fake news, or pieces of media deviating from fact, sensationalized, or taken out of context, isn't new, but the term has taken on a new role in recent years. Donald Trump popularized the term, but he uses it to classify any piece of media that is critical of him, despite its accuracy. Drawing attention to the idea that news outlets could be lying in conjunction with publicizing factual news coverage as false has created a gray area about trustworthy journalism. Consumers find themselves lost in a web of accusations and actualities. In the past, disagreements often stemmed from difference of opinion. Now, additional disagreements are rooted in disinformation, or deliberately misleading information used as propaganda, which has created another division in an already fragile nation.

Two factors contribute to this division: the disinformation poured out by the media and the responses of individuals. Too often, people react before fact-checking, riot before listening, and condemn before learning. As easy as it is to blame disinformation from the media, society cannot function without individuals holding a personal responsibility to be educated on current events and learn from more than one side of an issue. In this essay, we will use ethics to define a news consumer who will be a valuable and contributing member of society, with the idea that if everyone embodied said consumer, a society could function more productively, more peacefully, and more empathetically. Our formula consists of a combination of qualitative ethical principles: autonomy, aretaic ethics and utilitarianism.

Immanuel Kant's idea of personal autonomy follows the logic that people can govern themselves (Pojman 149), similar to the modern libertarian perspective. Instead of moral guidelines being imposed by external forces, autonomy sees that each person can act on their own free will, while following certain objective morals, like "one ought to prevent evil" and "one ought to do good" (Pojman 152). Today, the media bombards consumers with so much information that it can be difficult to differentiate fact, fiction, and opinion. An ideal citizen would use their own moral judgement in deciphering between the three and choosing which news stories to believe. For example, if someone only respects news stations reporting fiction as fact, like Breitbart, they are not using their autonomy ethically, because each person has a moral obligation to seek the truth. Further, personal autonomy will recognize that authority does not translate to truth (Pojman 149-150). Just because the president presents information as fact does not mean it is true, and a person's autonomy should recognize that. Conversely, while Kant would argue a journalist's or political figure's personal autonomy would tell them to be truthful, he would also recognize that consumers cannot trust another's autonomy, so they must take it upon themselves to find the truth.

Created by Aristotle, aretaic ethics sees virtue centered in the character or disposition of the agent rather than in the action itself (Pojman, 158). While "deontological and teleological ethical systems emphasize doing, aretaic ethics emphasizes being" (Pojman, 273), which means a virtuous person will manifest ethical actions simply by being virtuous. Further, aretaic ethics works to find virtue based on the presence of certain traits. For Aristotle, this might mean being kind-hearted or philanthropic. In terms of viewing modern media, this has to do with the credibility of the source and how the piece is written. What journalist is telling the story? Do they have ethos? What medium are they working for? Does the medium have ethos? Does the

story serve the journalist or medium in any way? How is the story being told? Is there bias or exaggeration? An ideal citizen should consider which answers align with their morals, find media to embody those values and consume their news accordingly.

Utilitarianism relies on the weighing and balancing of happiness over pain for the greatest number of people. Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher who lived during the turn of the 19th century, viewed human nature as hedonistic, meaning humans are driven by pleasure and avoidance of pain (Pojman 109). In an uneducated society, citizens might act selfishly, without consideration for their community. An educated person has the ability to rationalize costs and benefits for a purpose greater than themselves. Utilitarianism states that moral action maximizes utility for the most people, further defined by pleasure, happiness, ideals, and/or interests (Pojman 278). Rather than an act being moral because it brings oneself utility, an act is moral if it brings the greatest number of people utility. Further, this utility achieved through open communication and conversation with those who hold disagreeing viewpoints.

In applying ethics to modern media, these three theories can be weighed differently, but all should be considered. They represent the three components of interpreting news: the self, the source, and the content. Kant's personal autonomy states that people must arrive at their moral codes by themselves, through research and evidence. When it comes to finding trustworthy news, a person must not only search for it, but be selective in choosing what to believe. Once clear moral guidelines are set and a consumer begins searching for the truth, they should incorporate an aretaic ethical approach, focusing on the source and the writing itself. Most times, a source will appear credible at first glance. It takes reading between the lines and intuition to uncover the source's intentions. The writing can be evaluated by detecting exaggeration and opinion in place of fact. While autonomy concerns the self and aretaic ethics

considers the source, utilitarianism acts as the practical and recurring application of the formula, because it confronts the content directly. At this point, a person should consider the costs and benefits of the information they are given. If utility is maximized for the greatest number of people, the action should be considered ethical. Together, these three viewpoints allow consumers to form valid and well-founded beliefs about the world around them. An ideal consumer would evaluate each piece of news in this fashion.

The first months of the COVID-19 pandemic felt like being unprepared in the middle of a storm, but no one knew how big it was, how dangerous it was, or how long it was going to last. The media played a large role in this feeling of confusion and impending disaster. Fake news, in the traditional sense, spread faster than CDC updates, journalists pointed fingers at the president, and the president pointed fingers at China. In the midst of a global crisis impacting 7.8 billion people, the culmination of every medium having something to say while simultaneously saying nothing at all brought more chaos to an already dark place.

This formula can be used to evaluate COVID-19-related news. Before looking at any specific sources or news pieces, the topic must be approached autonomically. Each news consumer must take in an incredible amount of news and form their own opinions on how to handle the pandemic in accordance with their other values. Such news must be actively searched for rather than passively taken in. They must evaluate their own experiences with the pandemic, but also learn and listen to others' experiences. For example, if someone concludes that the pandemic response is overstated, they must question if this conclusion formed from reason or from personal opinion. Additionally, they must evaluate their response according to their other values. Is killing someone ethical, and does this equate to spreading a deadly virus? If the names of COVID-19 deaths were attributed publicly to the person who gave them the virus,

would people still consider it overstated? An autonomic approach would suggest that standing idly while people all over the world are getting sick and dying is not ethical. An ideal citizen would use their autonomy for good by learning how to best handle the emergency, rather than taking the easy way out by acting as if everything is normal.

News consumers have the difficult task of deciphering fact from fiction every time they read the news. Because COVID-19 is so widespread, information comes from nearly every source. In investigating the media, each person must consider who the reporters and sources are. Is it a respected journalist from the official news outlet's page or a Twitter post from someone unknown? If a person finds information on social media, for example, they should check if the person cites a reliable source. As mentioned earlier, just because it is a well-known or authoritative person does not make the information current. For example, Tucker Carlson is a prominent television host on the most watched news network, Fox News. Many Americans view his show as journalism when in reality, it is social commentary and entertainment. Carlson has repeatedly reported that masks are ineffective, discredited health experts, and claimed that the virus is not nearly as deadly as doctors believe (Carlson). This is not only misinformation, but also disinformation. By riling up viewers, Carlson forms brand loyalty, so he can make more false claims. While Fox is primarily responsible for labeling the show as such, consumers must take it upon themselves through the aretaic approach as well. At a task force briefing, President Donald Trump said, without the guidance of health experts, that scientists should check into using disinfectants and ultraviolet light to fight the virus. Immediately after the briefing, doctors from all over America responded that this was an irresponsible statement (Rogers). In this case, Trump is not a credible source.

Some people might find social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders unnecessary. However, according to utilitarianism, it is the ethical response. Someone holding a utilitarian perspective would understand that sacrifices are necessary to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In this case, the greatest good is keeping people healthy. Cancelling events, holidays, and other important life moments can feel devastating, but the health of the population takes precedent.

Producing the most ethical news consumer in this pandemic is not an easy task. It takes time, effort, and sacrifice. The most ideal consumer for COVID-19-related would take into account these three ethical theories. While there is no perfect person, the way to become the most beneficial member of society during this global emergency is to educate oneself with credible information and then follow the guidelines set out by the health experts. If everyone adopted these ethical perspectives to view news, people around the world would better handle the pandemic.

During the pandemic, residents in the United States were also faced with a presidential election. According to the current president, every piece of media criticizing him is fake news, and even the most traditional, bipartisan debate felt like an elementary game of who can talk louder. With trust in the government at an all-time low, Americans were expected to choose the next president relying on television news coverage and the information available on a phone screen. The media had immense power of persuasion, able to impact the economy, foreign policy, and the pandemic, and with everyone quarantining, they were a key middleman between candidates and voters.

To ethically consume election-related news in 2020 and onward, voters should funnel media through the formula. An autonomic view forces voters to consider their own political

beliefs and how they got them. Especially with the reemergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, people are faced with the question: Do I hold my beliefs because I formed them through reason or because they're what I was taught? Further, an ideal citizen would listen to multiple sides of a story, put themselves in another's shoes, and break down their own reasoning for their beliefs. Finally, they would search for information rather than passively taking it in, understanding that media fed up by social media platforms, like Facebook, is often targeted.

An aretaic consumer would trust the bipartisan debates and historically moderate news outlets as their principal sources. Consuming news through sources with traditional political affiliations, like CNN and FOX, can be ethical as long as the consumer recognizes a present bias and doesn't allow it to consume them. Ideally, they would consume equal amounts of media, in time and content, from each side of the political spectrum. Additionally, sources who lean to extremes must be carefully evaluated for what they contribute that a more moderate source does not.

Looking at politics through a utilitarian perspective, an ideal citizen would consider what actions would create the greatest amount of utility for most Americans. However, this discounts many underserved populations as they are not the majority, which clearly isn't the most ethical interpretation. Instead, utilitarianism can be applied to the journalistic perspective by providing the most information, or utility, to the greatest number of people. Then, an ideal consumer would use their autonomy to form their beliefs. In this case, utility is defined by correct information, rather than being defined by pleasure. Connecting back to the consumer perspective, an ideal citizen would want correct information to be dispersed widely and fairly, so democracy can work properly.

The 2020 election news coverage has been inevitably wrapped into the COVID-19 conversation. A combination of these three perspectives in interpreting election media not only distinguishes politics from the pandemic but allows voters to explore all sides of current issues before making an educated decision on who to vote for. The most ethical approach evaluates existing beliefs, researches alternatives, and considers what is best for the whole population. If all Americans approached politics with this thought process, the United States would be filled with a more informed, and therefore more understanding, population.

Interpreting media through ethical theories is important because it forms beliefs, and beliefs translate to actions. An educated consumer of ethical news will act safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they will cast their vote for president with sound reasoning behind their decision. By viewing news through the perspectives of autonomy, aretaic ethics, and utilitarianism, people would have a shared understanding of the nation's problems, even if they don't agree on the solution. In a world confused by disinformation, this shared understanding can be the difference between civil discourse and hostile disagreement.

Work Cited

Carlson, Tucker. "Tucker Carlson: The Coronavirus Pandemic Is a Global Fraud Perpetrated by

China, Abetted by the Powerful." Fox News, FOX News Network, 3 Dec. 2020.

Pojman, Louis P. *Ethics Discovering Right and Wrong*. 3rd ed., Wadsworth Publishing

Company, 1998.

Rogers, Katie, et al. "Trump's Suggestion That Disinfectants Could Be Used to Treat

Coronavirus Prompts Aggressive Pushback." *The New York Times*, The New York

Times, 24 Apr. 2020.