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Normative Examination of Journalistic Professionalism in Pakistan

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Abstract

In an underdeveloped country like Pakistan, journalistic professionalism is a rare practice to be observed. While, journalists are considered as the watchdogs of any society who bring true content for their audience. Despite code of conduct being there, no governing body monitor the situation as per ethical grounds. This study investigates the Normative dimension, one of the three dimensions offered by Singer in his model of professionalism. Qualitative analysis of media content (N=348) and interviews of working journalists is done in this study. Open and axial coding method is used to generate codes/themes, and results show that journalists should abide by the code of ethics, achieve truthfulness and should be able to maintain balance in the stories and lastly as a service to the society, should file the content which is faculty correct and may not harm the audience.

Keywords: professionalism, journalism, 3d model of professionalism, qualitative research, content analysis, interviews

Introduction

The presence of strong professional organization and editorial policies serve an important aspect leading to professional journalistic practice and training of the journalists to file the content which is beneficial to the society (Deuze, 2005). On contrary, both print and online professional reporting has showed an impressive enthusiasm for creating various platforms for journalists that how professional journalists uphold an agreement for the benefit of public. There are no such boundaries between off-and online journalists with respect to the objectivity and esteem.

Agarwal and Barthel (Henkel et al., 2020; Sheetal & Michael, 2013) observed a rebellious nature in a survey, taking about journalists expected jobs among 14 online U.S. journalists, who completely dismissed the

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thoughts of objectivity, transparency and lack of bias in any of the stories covered by them. Nonetheless, different investigations have been carried out which revealed that online journalists have taken on the conventional disseminator job, which was recently fulfilled by print media or offline media journalists (Henkel et al., 2020; Keren & Neiger, 2015) and which can be connected to the estimation of restricted, objective journalism (Deuze, 2005; Henkel et al., 2020) and may cause harm to the profession and the journalists at times.

Enlightenment of the public is the utmost necessary requirement in the field of journalism (Birgir & Sigurður, 2017; SPJ, 2014).Without compromising the quality of the content, moral values tend to develop trust and enhances credibility of the public towards journalists. The commitment to the profession by journalists maintaining moral values and standards distinguishes professionalism leaving behind the notion of money making at the expense of ethics. Lack of ethics and professional commitment towards the profession tends to undermine the public interest and loses the credibility of the journalist, hence code of ethics is considered another vital attribute in all professions specially journalism. Guarding of ethical values in any profession shows commitment and obligation specifically in journalism it builds mutual trust of both the general public and journalists (Birgir & Sigurður, 2017; Davis, 1991).

Literature Review

There is a massive difference between traditional and online media in terms of its professional journalistic approach (Seungahn & Deborah, 2012). New interactive digital media has provoked the shift of roles in traditional professional journalistic practice. Specifically, with the hype of social media which has given rise to citizen journalism has raised a question on the professional journalistic practice and its creditability with regards to journalism and journalists. With the changing media environment, social media has become a challenge to journalists to maintain their online persona 24/7 and contact with their audiences yet raising a question on the professional capability of the journalists (Diana & Avery, 2019) who are trying to construct and build brands (Diana & Avery, 2019). Concentration of journalists on news coverage training as a particular site of progress interweaved with social, political and financial power to prepare journalists

with polished methodology and skills in their professional practice. Expert journalists vary on how explicitly they grasp explicit jobs. The populist catalytic nature of various other professions gathers less help than the gate keeping or disseminator jobs (Vos et al., 2018).

The Normative Ability of Journalist

Normative dimension deals with the professional ethics and the ability of the journalists to self- regulate. Journalistic professionalism, when applied to normative dimension, has the most solid claims and the ethics to be followed. For professional journalists the most accepted code of conduct is "The Society of Professional Code of Ethics". To be a professional in any field one must abide by its code of conduct, follow ethics and the laws associated with it (Long, 2014). It is mystifying that a lot of changes encompassing news coverage especially related to digital environments, involving the use of technology is treated as experience and a bunch of news without any proof being present. In this regard, journalistic practice where social media hype has taken over traditional journalistic practice. Hence news is spread without verification causing a threat to the professional practice of journalists and causing harm to the credibility of the journalist. The language encompassing news covering, and democracy specifically has gotten so unpredictable and complex, therefore directing journalists to a set of guides to a practice. It has become a war rather than obligation to journalists who can't practice their normative freedom while filing their content (Nielsen, 2017; Thomas, 2019).

Journalists should be able to compare existing world and force requests that are best suitable for journalists, moreover what journalists are interested in doing along with public interest, abiding by normative theories should be made a compulsion (Nielsen, 2017). This makes it apparent that journalism needs to have a normative anchor. In other words, when confronted with the question of what journalism is for, the need of a response capable of addressing the wide domain of journalism that is practiced as a commitment to the audience and the society at large.

Normative models should be versatile and flexible, ought not be unstructured because issues with normative thought is that journalists are ought to add to critical thinking, since it is related with activism and an

obligation to society. Besides this a sense of responsibility of what harm disseminating false news can bring to the public and its effect on the organization and the journalist himself. Most importantly, professionals tend to give an impression of being critical and vigilant to avoid the spread of biasness and negativity. Moreover, basic journalistic values and norms should be strong enough that no journalist tends to deviate from them (Liesbeth & Nico, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This study tends to employ Singer's three-dimension model of professionalism as theoretical framework with Normative Dimension. The key component of the study revolves around the idea of examination and evaluation of professionalism of working Pakistani journalists. To properly examine this, it is important to have an in-depth understanding of the model given by Singer, who gave conceptual definitions and offers a useful framework to be implemented in study with respect to working journalists across Pakistan. Normative dimension covers service orientation of professionals and distinctive ethics, which justify the privilege of self-regulation that the society grants them. This dimension tends to have the most solid claims among journalistic professionalism. Freedom of press was granted in the first amendment that journalists would have a democratic liberty and a moral obligation to serve the society with the content they publish (Long, 2014).

For this purpose, journalists adhere to the code of conduct, professional standards and ethics that come with the profession (Singer, 2003). Society of Professional Journalists has provided a set of guidelines, like code of ethics which journalists tend to follow while filing the content for the public. These codes are providing guidelines and a path to follow, not practicing them won't lead to the cancellation of the license or any punishment, just a set of suggestive guidelines to follow for a better approach (Long, 2014 Singer, 2003). U.S. journalists claimed that their service is for the public, not limited to one individual but to the society as a whole. It is a very common exercise in journalistic circles that the main job of the press is to provide true account of information and let audience manage their views carefully.

As per journalistic theory of democracy, the more information is given to the public, the better equipped they are to participate in the society (Singer, 2003), thus putting the whole responsibility of shaping the society on journalists. Mostly journalists are asked to look for what's more important, report truth reasonably and genuinely, to limit the damage to sources by keeping them confidential, subjects and partners, to act autonomously, without commitment to any interest other than the public benefit, and to be accountable to their profession and fellow journalists. The topic of this specific study is important in the current scenario due to the changing practice of how information and news are shared and disseminated with the public.

Research Question

RQ1: Which professional journalistic activities reflect the normative dimension?

Methodology

Qualitative research method is adopted for this study to examine the journalistic professionalism in Pakistan. The purpose of adopting qualitative methodology is that it focuses on drawing deeper insights of various concepts, in-depth analysis, interpretation of data, behavior, perceptions, feelings and understanding of the subject under study (Rahman, 2017). The journalists selected for the study are the ones who are having more than 5 years of experience in the field. 10 print media journalists based on experience are interviewed. The news stories, columns and talk shows are studied and evaluated deeply on the basis of which their respective interview questions are framed.

Interview questions varied depending upon the work done by the journalists previously. Hence after examining the media content the journalists have filed and comparing it with what they tend to say in the interview will give an in-depth analysis of the capacity of the working journalists of Pakistan. This comparative analysis of the work of the journalists and interview analysis is to be done through normative dimension of Singer's 3D Model of Professionalism.

Content Analysis

The first step of content analysis involves analysis of news content and later in-depth interviews of working journalists across Pakistan. From the analysis of collected data, themes and codes emerged, in line with the research question, the issue and agendas for both professionalism and journalistic practice, the media content of the respective journalists is analyzed, and interviews are conducted. Content analysis is the best suitable method to analyze textual data and the themes that emerge from it hence falling in line with the naturalistic paradigm. Going down the memory lane of naturalistic paradigm, researchers regard content analysis the most appropriate and flexible for analyzing textual information (Cavanagh, 1997), implemented in analyzing both media content and interviews of the respective journalists.

Textual data can be gathered from narrative feedback, survey question/answers, interviews, observations of the focus group, books or manuals (Hsiu-Fang & Sarah, 2005; Nancy et al., 2002) but for this study data was gathered from news stories, electronic talk shows and later from the interviews of working journalists across Pakistan. For accuracy and validity, the researcher read the news stories multiple times to make sure that no point has been missed, secondly while transcribing the interviews, the audio recording was listened multiple times to make sure no detail is missed and, thirdly after the analysis of the interview it was sent to the respective journalist to cross check and verify that the researcher has quoted all the points which the journalist had mentioned in interview.

Interviews

Interviews are used as a strategy to gain in-depth information about the participants' experiences, perceptions, beliefs and values regarding a certain phenomenon (Coughlan, 2009). One to one interview is the most suitable method to record feelings, attitudes, observations and experiences of the participants. Interviewees were framed as a set of semi-structured questions by the researcher which allowed the journalists to share details of the work and under what circumstances they tend to work. Time span of the interviews varied from journalist to journalist depending on the interviewee's time constraint and their desire to share their personal

information, organizational pressure and interesting experiences they had. Interview questions tend to support and to find out the answers of the research question of the respective study.

Coding and Themes

Interviews acted as the secondary data source for the current study. In-depth analysis of the data collected from the interviews isn't only imperative to render helpful research perceptions of knowledge but in addition acts as the basis to enhance the credibly of a qualitative researcher. In order to quantify the qualitative data, coding is done. Coding in qualitative study is as important as numbers in quantitative study. Codes are the smallest unit of text that give meaning to it. Codes can be a word, phrase or a paragraph, the researcher tends to read the text to get familiar with it. Initially no sophisticated codes are required, then comes the line-by-line coding, as the name suggests the researcher looks for more detailed codes. This step leads to more profound data as codes will be more detailed where the researcher gathered similar codes together. Categorizing the codes, data will look more consistent and overarching themes will emerge.

Validity of the study

The incarnation of subjective examination or qualitative study is to understand and perceive patterns and designs among words so as to develop an understanding without trading off its lavishness and dimensionality. In order to establish the validity of the study, the researcher used three ways to prove the validity of the study. Using three methods of validity i.e., descriptive validity, interpretive validity and theoretical validity the researcher had proven the validity of the study. Validity and reliability enhance the credibility of the study and improves the trustworthiness and decreases the biasness which the researcher tends to have at a certain point in the study.

Analysis

Results of Media Content

The selected content included news stories, columns and talk shows. The media content was analysed using Singer's Dimension of Professionalism i.e., Normative.

Table 1

Codes/Themes of Media Content

Codes	Properties
Truthfulness	Journalists, trying to be thought full of how a person should do his catharsis, specially is case of politicians, only then it will be beneficial for the public and bringing good to the society
Balance in the story	In the meeting suggestions were given in order to make medical sector better and opportunities for the doctors should be increased were the main agenda of the conference
News sense	The details and factual information of the accounts and the results of the investigation makes the story worth mentioning to the audience
Service to the society	Journalists, as a service to the society has mentioned the issues caused to the students by these private sector universities

Normative ability of the journalist can be defined as the journalist's way to avoid bias, achieve truthfulness and how to maintain balance in the content. Upon examining the media content various codes emerged which were similar in the work of journalists under study. Mostly, the normative dimension relates to the well-being of the society, i.e., what good can journalists bring to the society with their content. The more journalists are capable of presenting both sides of the story, the more authentic the information will be and the audience will be able to judge. The first and foremost thing a journalist should keep in mind is that truthfulness is the key that can only bring good to the society.

This practice has been observed in most of the media content filed by the journalist. Journalists, despite the organizational and external pressure, are trying their best to provide information which is authentic and covers both sides of the story. The content being posted on the present day is without a doubt is extremely important either for good or bad and its impact is extraordinary and may bring harm to the journalist's reputation. For instance, if a journalist has a personal point of view and linking with some

political party is reflected in the content. The media content filed by the journalists had some point of views of journalists which led to biasness and showed the inclination of journalists towards certain parties and organizations.

Balancing the story is another important trait which a journalist should master before disseminating the content. Covering both sides of the story is the pre-requisite of the profession and a skill which most of the media content lacked. Most of the journalists only covered one side of the story and gave their audience half cooked story which in some cases have proven harmful, especially the stories regarding land and property. This is a big failure on the part of journalist and the profession itself. Whereas in some of the cases, the journalists have tried to bring balance in their stories by quoting the statements of the officials who are involved, because the general public believes in the content with contained references and big names.

Results of Interview

In order to examine professionalism of working journalists across Pakistan, the media content of ten working journalists was studied and examined by the researcher. After in-depth analysis of media content, interviews of journalists were conducted. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was framed to get a better understanding of the professionalism of the working journalists across Pakistan. Later these interviews were examined by the researcher out of which various codes emerged.

Table 2

Codes/Themes of Interview

Codes	Properties
Neutrality	By covering both the sides of the story, only then you can have both the views and have a neutral story
Biasness	In order to give credence and full account of information, the journalist verifies news from both the parties
Code of conduct	In Pakistan regarding the field of journalism code of conduct is there, but there is no implementation. Journalists while reporting have this thing in mind to abide by laws and

Codes	Properties
	values. This code of conduct is very important for the field of journalism and it should be fully implemented in Pakistan
Source Protection	In this profession, journalist can't work without their sources and being fair to them is the basic need which should be fulfilled by the journalist otherwise he should leave the profession

Normative dimension revolves around the codes of ethics and journalists' service to society while filing stories. Ethics covers everything starting from the main aim of the journalist for not being biased in their media content to balance their stories and to be able to achieve truthfulness. In Pakistan, being biased is a common practice amongst journalists and this can't be ignored because journalists tend to support or highlight a specific agenda which their organizations have or their affiliation with a certain political party. A common practice in the current times is WhatsApp journalism due to which truth gets compromised. Due to these reason journalists are unable to provide a complete picture to the audience.

At times, quoting facts to the viewers can help reduce the biasness and letting the audience decide about right or wrong regarding a certain issue. Inclination of the journalists as per their interests and views may lead to biasness in the stories and hence affect the people and organization in one way or the other. As a service to the society, journalists must consider the consequences and hence should report the exact situation to the crowd. In some cases, the organization and the editorial board might have to face the consequences of public reaction and other external influences.

In Pakistan, code of conduct is there, but there is no implementation. While reporting, the journalist should keep this in mind to abide by laws and values. This code of conduct is very important for the field of journalism and it should be fully implemented in Pakistan. Journalists in Pakistan try their best to self-regulate themselves, but then comes the pressure on the organizations and the powerful are not held accountable. Due to blackmailing and organizational pressure, journalists have to angle down the stories as per the demands which affects the ethics of journalism and hence the skills of journalists get compromised. For a journalist it is unethical to misreport since it causes harm to people and most importantly

this raises a question mark on the credibility of the journalist and the organization. Being human, the journalists have certain interests which are sometimes reflected in the stories they file. At times journalists are unable to obtain the other side of the story because of two reasons, the other party is reluctant to provide any information – a delay is caused due to hindrance in getting the view of the other party and as a result, an unbalanced story is filed by the journalist compromising the ethics of journalism and media.

Although code of conduct is very important in every field, but in Pakistan no one cares about the code of conduct despite being several bodies which are formulated to monitor. The journalist claimed to have posted stories with full accuracy, honesty and in an unbiased way. In order to authenticate the content, the sources and the news, the journalist claims to verify the news by getting versions from both sides. According to a journalist, only print media journalists abide by the code of ethics, whereas electronic media journalists are unable to follow the code of ethics due to the race for breaking news.

Other important factor which hinders ethical reporting is the financial glitch from which journalists suffer, especially in a country like Pakistan where media is owned by businessmen and conglomerates. These owners are mostly unaware of the prerequisites of reporting and writing and are only concerned with making money, hence compromising ethics and making journalists do illegal things to fulfil their needs. Due to honorarium compensations and discrimination between the electronic media and print media journalists in Pakistan, ethics gets compromised. Journalists are inclined more towards earning which is leading to professional misconduct. Another reason for misreporting and compromise on quality and ethics is that there are no or less job opportunities available for the journalists to flourish. In Pakistan, where journalists are not sure whether they would be able to keep their job the next moment, they are apprehensive about the prospects of demanding an increase in salaries and revision of contracts, which further leads to the exploitation and as a consequence give rise to unethical reporting.

Discussion

Normative dimension, states about the service of the journalists towards the society following the code of conduct. The question here arises what the

code of conduct is, and who is responsible to check on journalists whether they are abiding by it or not. Several governing bodies are there but they are just there, having no specific roles to play. A print media journalist stated:

> "*Yes, I think code of conduct is important for every field, especially in journalism but unfortunately in a country like Pakistan, no one cares about the codes of conduct. There are some codes of conduct issued by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), Press Council of Pakistan (PCP) and Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) but such codes are not implemented as they should be.*"

While covering stories of National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and some other high officials the journalists quoted the story of both the parties in order to maintain balance but in the end somehow got biased with revealing the names of the parties. Although all the journalists have quoted the legal framework, documents for their arrest and clauses but it seems that no action has been taken against the guilty, either NAB gets biased or there is no update about the case. The core responsibility of a journalist includes stating the accurate content without being biased, balancing the news stories and achieving truthfulness through their media content. Most of the journalists claim that they are unable to file an unbiased story due to the personal interests and organizational pressure. A journalist stated:

> "*As I would like to state and think, the fundamental duty of a journalist is to report the news in an honest, unprejudiced and unopinionated way. Accordingly, I try to verify the information and my own composing clings to this model.*"

This shows a contradiction in the skills of the journalists and the laws to be implemented. On one hand they talk about the laws and acts which have been implemented and on the other they are unable to quote the wrongdoings and the legal actions being imposed. To avoid biasness, most journalists have quoted facts and presented actual data to the audience which again shows truthfulness and enhances the credibility. In view of these laws to be implemented, the other issue which print media journalists face is the fear of lagging behind in the race of Breaking News which causes harm to ethical and fair reporting.

"In my view, print media, especially the leading newspapers, are following the codes of conduct. Electronic media in the race of breaking news is not following suit."

Journalists have talked openly about the insincere behavior of the high officials of various organizations and the failure they are bringing to the nation which shows how urgently these issues need to be considered and monitored. Little details added to the story help people develop the sense and understanding of what is happening in organizations that they may get the full picture and true essence of what is happening in the society. By citing all the references related to a specific story, the journalists have tried their best to maintain a level of truthfulness and transparency with the audience. Every genre of journalism they are practicing has its own constrains; in every aspect have to do massive research work with the help of sources, only then journalists are able to bring the true essence of journalism in media. According to a journalist:

"*Misleading thousands of people is something that really damages the credibility of the person, organization and the profession itself. The figures are often exaggerated which is criminal from my point of view and it is important to get that monitored.*"

Another cause of misreporting is that journalists are not paid enough for the work they are doing. There is a massive segregation between print and electronic media journalists. Print media journalists are paid very less as compared to the electronic media journalists which itself has given rise to unethical and misleading reporting. Journalists have deployed various illegal means of earning by taking unnecessary favors. A journalist stated that:

"*40% of the organizations are good to their staff and reporters and the rest of them delay the salaries. I know people from TV and newspapers whose arrears are accrued for a year or 6 months which has an impact on the way they report. Providing a good quality environment and financial support is very rare in Pakistan. This is something which forces reporters to opt for other illegal and unfair options.*"

According to all the journalists, this segregation among journalists is curtailing the freedom of writing and expression. Along with the differences between print and electronic media, English and Urdu language journalism

have their differences too. Urdu journalism is considered mostly sensational and audience driven and most of the times it is believed to be responsible for spread of fake news.

Due to the job insecurity associated with the profession of journalism, most journalists worry about the future in the field. Since media is owned by advertisers and stakeholders, one blunder can make a journalist lose his job. Only a few organizations are strong enough to sustain the pressure, while most of them, conversely, aren't capable of looking after their employees. Due to the growth of electronic media, the pay scales have increased as compared to what they used to be in print media. A journalist stated:

> "*For every person in electronic media including reporters, cameramen and NLEs, the pay scale has increased a lot as compared to print media. But a fact that can't be denied is that there is a lot of discrimination in electronic media. A reporter is the one who goes to field, works hard, has the news sense, sources and mostly does ethical journalism.*"

Due to low wages and renumeration, the sources also suffer with the journalists. Most of the journalists have to abide by the bond of confidentiality and as a service to them can't disclose the name of the sources. This shows the professionalism of the journalists in abiding by the rules of confidentially and maintaining the trust of their sources. A journalist from *Hum News* claimed that:

> "*Obviously, I am fair. If I am unfair with my sources, I should leave this profession. If someone is misquoting his sources, he is committing a crime and he should not be working in the profession or attached to an organization as he is not fulfilling the basic criteria of being fair in quoting their sources. He simply doesn't deserve to be in this profession.*"

Journalism is all about assurance and security of the sources. But it depends upon the topic of the story. A journalist claimed:

> "*Revealing the name may cost him/her job or even life in some cases. However, I check/verify the accuracy of the information and get it published as I get it. Sometimes my source has no serious threats to his/her job or life but he/she just doesn't want his/her name associated with the story, so I wouldn't mention the name in my story because I wouldn't want to break their confidence and*

lose them forever. A journalist can't afford losing sources as he/she can't survive in journalism without them."

Information from the sources and journalism go side by side and hence journalists can't function without their sources. Especially in case of investigative journalism it demands courage especially in protecting one's own self along with the sources involved. To get into the details of every issue and collect clues, the journalists should be fully trained and capable to safeguard himself along with the sources. A journalist stated:

"*Journalism is all about maintaining confidentiality of sources. If you are exposing your source, it will not be easy for you to move in the society, and therefore, we make every possible effort in saving our sources. In our organization, our editor asked to end this anonymous practice and said that it should be discouraged, the sources should be quoted by name or quoted with reference to an official document or in the end shared with the editor. While quoting a critical story where I can't write the name of my sources, I share the names or official documents with my editor. Sometimes sources give the documents, I keep them confidential, and show them but do not give them the copy. If the source binds you then you have to obey them in order to stay loyal to them.*"

Information comes from various organizations and if the sources are disclosed then getting information becomes a hassle. A journalist from Express Tribune stated:

"*I, as a reporter, do not disclose any source which I am not supposed to disclose because of the trust we have. I give 100 percent assurance to my sources that they will be protected, and their names won't be disclosed. If the sources get the protection, then I will be provided with the accurate information. Some sources can be disclosed sometimes but only with their permission. These sources can be in the form of a person, legal document or anything. The documents that I get from certain sources are there for my confirmation that the story is 100 percent accurate but again I can't disclose from where I got the information. I can file the story, present the information but can't say I have the document.*"

The stories and issues covered by most journalists depicts how all the journalists are working hard on research and making effort in collecting facts. The media content filed by them is like a description of various issues

and events that audience should be aware off and therefore they bring the issue under discussion to enlighten them.

Conclusion

Talking about the normative dimension, code of conduct is very important and there are only a few organizations which are abiding by the rules and regulations of journalism and reporting. When a reporter who is working in the field files a story, code of conduct is there in the back of his mind and journalists make every possible effort to abide by it. Media of Pakistan including some organizations are considered very powerful which hinders the implementation of code of conduct, hence giving rise to unethical practices on the part of journalists and causing damage to the profession. Firstly, because the media industry is going through a financial crunch, the survival of journalists is very tough. People may work in a multi-dimensional perspective by making YouTube channels and using other means to avoid unethical practice to make the ends meet. Journalists who are financially independent will be freer and hence can report issues based on facts and present true account of information without being biased or scared.

The code of conduct says that a journalist will be a full-time journalist and won't be able to do anything else but being a journalist. The code should allow journalists to get into other professions like teaching etc. Journalists should be provided other means of earning in order to avoid unethical reporting. The profession of journalism should be made so ideal in terms of salary, perks and other incentives to avoid illegal means of earning. Be it ethical reporting or maintaining the confidentiality clause towards the sources, journalists have to master all the skills of reporting to be called a professional. They are responsible for transforming interpretation into reality and are therefore accountable to the public.

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