

**Responsibility and Paternalism: Comments on Ryan Thomas's "*In Defense of Paternalistic Journalism*"**

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I would like to briefly and critically respond to Ryan's excellent presentation on paternalism in journalism. Ryan presents a good historical account of how the current issue and tension regarding paternalism in the media has evolved. He presents his concerns about the traditional theories of responsible journalism, and then responds by making some modest claims about the justification of paternalism in journalism. While I agree with Ryan's account of the evolution of the current debates about paternalism in the media, I am not convinced that there is justification for paternalistic practices in the Profession of Journalism.

I believe that Journalists have a clear and compelling duty for reporting fairly and accurately, and that excellence in this endeavor constitutes the principle good that is internal to the practice of journalism, and which guides the other goods that society draws from the activities of their practice. Thus, excellence in this activity is the primary virtue that governs the profession. This conception of the aims of journalism and responsibility in the profession, are already well delineated in traditional approaches.

In my opinion it is not the role of journalists to act on behalf of private interest groups, or the government. Likewise it is not their role to represent the public or control information on behalf of the public. In short, it is not the appropriate role for journalists to engage in activities that fall within the scope of other practices better qualified to perform this role. To be specific, journalists would be permitted, under weak or strong paternalism, to exercise professional judgment in a manner analogous to instances of medical doctors invoking therapeutic privilege. What would this mean? Patients seek the help of doctors for their specialized knowledge and skills when they are ill or desire to live healthier lives. What would be the correlative between journalists and the members of the public? Would it mean that we should expect journalists to tell us what information is correct, or tell us what information is pertinent and what we should conclude from it? Would they select, from the information gathered in their investigative efforts, just what we need to know by engaging in "choice architecture?" Wouldn't this

approach blur the lines between investigative reporting and editorializing? My concern regarding paternalism in journalism is two-fold. First, Journalists are not analogous to medical doctors operating within the scope of a given expertise. What kind of education would make journalists uniquely qualified to engage in choice architecture for all of the many topics and issues that they must report? Secondly, it is the province of other qualified practices to disseminate pertinent information to the public, and correspondingly it is the responsibility of individual citizens to direct their own affairs, both in seeking information and participating in democratic electoral processes.

However, just as I do not want my government doing all of my thinking for me, I do not want news organizations doing so either. Journalists are not elected to represent people, nor do we hire them to represent our interests. Ryan agrees that Media organizations are better able to perform responsibly when their work is not unduly influenced by either governmental or corporate interests. Yet, in a way permitting paternalistic measures by media organizations, opens up a greater risk of the well intentioned efforts of journalists to inadvertently politicize their reports, or do so by direction of their editorial staff. While this arguably already occurs, it seems wiser to embrace a virtue that seeks to mitigate this, rather than encourage it.

Despite my concerns about paternalism in journalism, I found Ryan's presentation very stimulating and it brought to the fore many issues regarding the role of the media in democracies that are of vital interest to us all.