Graduate Section:

Universal Principles of Media Ethics: South African and German Perspectives

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Abstract: The increasingly globalised nature of media and journalism has led to a review of ethical standards, mainly to find universal ethical values which are applicable in a world with countless different cultures. This article attempts to address this field of research in comparing South African and German approaches to the topic of media ethics. Firstly, it outlines theories of universal and specific cultural ethical principles in journalism. Secondly, it shows how the conception of universal ethical principles, so called *protonorms*, is interpreted differently in the two cultures and how specific cultural values of media ethics are rated among the two cultural frameworks of Germany and South Africa. An online survey conducted among German and South African journalism students found significant differences in the ranking of media ethics principles as well as similarities and differences in the interpretations of *protonorms*. The results support existing normative theories of universal media ethics, such as the theory of *protonorms*, in contributing explorative empirical data to this field of mainly theoretical research.

Keywords: culture, Germany, universal media ethics, libertarianism, principles, protonorms, South Africa, ubuntu

Introduction

In an era of transnational media, Ward (2005: 4) states that an urgent need has emerged to consider new parameters of universal media ethics due to the globalisation of local journalism. Giddens (1990: 64) defines globalisation as "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa". As Christians, Rao, Ward and Wasserman (2008: 136) note, journalists around the world have to consider that the ethical framework underpinning their work could be influenced by globalisation. Moreover, they ask if journalism ethics as practiced in Africa are distinct from those in other parts of the world. Thus,

their initial question is whether ethical values for journalism should be seen as particular to the sociocultural context in which journalism is practiced, or if universal values exist that could guide journalists around the world when they consider the ethical dimensions of their work (ibid.).

From the ethical perspective, the difficulty of a globalised media is rooted in finding and developing standards which can be applied to journalism worldwide (ibid.). An illustrating example is the publication of 12 cartoons depicting the Islamic Prophet Muhammad on September 30, 2005 in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. With the publication of the cartoons, the newspaper successfully triggered global discussions among scholars, politicians and the public about media ethics, religion and the concept of freedom of expression (Mohamed, 2008: 142). As Ward (2005: 3) notes, "[*t*]he globalization of news media requires a radical rethinking of the principles and standards of journalism ethics [...]." Moreover, Ayish and Sadig (1997: 105f.) assert that in recent years "[...] culturally based ethical orientations are given greater weight." In this case, Mohamed (2008: 150) demands a revision of the Western concept of freedom of expression and its legal manifestation from an Islamic religious perspective (ibid.).

This case serves as an example for the redirection of target groups and ranges of the national media towards a global audience. In this context, new ethical guidelines have to be developed, incorporating perspectives from Western and non-western cultural backgrounds (Fourie 2008: 105).
A concept proposed by Christians and Nordenstreng (2004: 25) provides a theoretical base for further research in the field of globalised media ethics: the authors identified so called *protonorms* as universal ethical principles in journalism (ibid.). Although the authors state that these *protonorms* are universal, journalists worldwide interpret them differently according to their cultural background (ibid.). Therefore, the central issue of this article is to compare individual interpretations of media ethics principles among groups with different cultural backgrounds. This article aims to contribute to this field of research in conducting an explorative study among groups of South African and German journalism students in comparing their interpretations of media ethics principles. The central question guiding the research is:

How do German and South African journalism students interpret universal media ethics principles?

The aim of this study is to explore how German and South African journalism students interpret widely accepted principles of media ethics, so called *protonorms*. The subsequent research questions are:

> *RQ1:* Is a significant difference in the ranking of seven principles of media ethics to be found among the two groups?

RQ2: Do the two groups differ in their individual interpretations of the three *protonorms* and are the interpretations within the groups homogeneous?

RQ3: Is it possible to explain the expected differences in interpretations and weightings of media ethics principles and *protonorms* with the outlined theories on cultural frameworks of each group?

To answer these questions, considerations on universal media ethics are presented as a theoretical point of departure. Furthermore, the concepts of *ubuntu* as an cultural background for the group of South African students as well as a Western perspective on media ethics principles for the German students are outlined. In doing so, theoretical frameworks are given to interpret the results of the questionnaire. The methodological approach is presented subsequently. Following, the findings are described and discussed and the last section contains concluding remarks.

Theoretical background

To locate this study in the vast field of media ethics, the concept of deontology has to be outlined briefly. According to Krüger (2004: 3), deontological theories justify actions by their inherent rightness and duties. Principles are central to this perspective. Consequently, ethical acting in journalism is defined as considering and adhering to principles of media ethics instead of being guided by e.g. the outcome of an action (ibid.). This perspective serves as a philosophical base for the study conducted in this article.

Furthermore, the terms culture and national culture have to be defined in order to root the theoretical and empirical approach of the present study. Regarding a national culure, Hofstede (1984: 77) states that "despite the regional differences within a particular nation, we can still distinguish some ways of thinking that most inhabitants share and that we can consider part of their national culture or national character". The present study uses the aforementioned concept of national culture as a base to compare German and South African students on their interpretation of universal principles of media ethics. Assuming that all participating students from Germany and South Africa belong to and identify themselves with their national culture, this slightly simplified approach guarantees the feasibility of the study. However, it remains unsettled whether the individual cultural background can be fully equalised with the national culture a person was born in.

A tri-level theory of ethics: protonorms

As Christians et al. (2008: 137) note, the impact of globalisation on media worldwide makes it "imperative that journalists consider their ethical responsibility within a global context". That leads to a need for new interpretations

of existing media ethics principles from an international perspective (ibid.). The authors assert that a fundamental question in the scholarly debate on media ethics is whether universal principles and guidelines can be found or developed (ibid.: 137f.). Christians et al. (2008: 138) suggest to "explore the possibility of a theory of ethics and a conception of universal principles that not only 'allow' but also welcome and invite the recognition of difference".

Deriving from the problem stated above, Christians et al. (2008: 140ff.) propose a "tri-level theory of ethics" regarding media ethics principles. The three parts of the theory are, according to the authors, presuppositions, principles and precepts (ibid.). Christians et al. (2008: 151) state that a "[m]oral theory in three dimensions enables a new generation of communication ethics, one that is theoretically credible, transnational, and intercultural". The normative, three-dimensional theory they propose can be an approach to find universal media ethics since it is "rooted in a rich and holistic view of humans as relational and communicative" (ibid.). According to the authors, ethics are not meant to consist of rational *a priori* principles, but should rather emerge out of lived experience (ibid.). In other words: "Rather than simply posit universal propositions as standards that all public communicators must adhere to, [...] a global approach must take seriously the contingency, history, dialogue, and local voices integral to the process of theorizing" (ibid.: 167).

In this context, Christians and Nordenstreng (2004: 25) published an article proposing three basic but broad ethical principles, so called *protonorms*: respect for human dignity, truth-telling and nonviolence:

- "Respect for human dignity" is, according to Christians and Nordenstreng (2004: 21), "the shared commitment out of which we begin to generate notions of a just society". It has to be seen as a common sacredness of all human beings regardless of their age, gender, race, class or ethnicity (ibid.).
- "Truth-telling" is seen as another "underlying principle about which there is cross-cultural agreement" (ibid.: 22). It is described as axiological and integral to human consciousness and social formation. (ibid.).
- "Nonviolence" is portrayed as the following: "Out of nonviolence, we articulate ethical theories about not harming the innocent as an obligation that is cosmic and irrespective of our roles or ethnic origin" (ibid.: 23).

According to Christians et al. (2008: 136) these values should not be understood as transcendent guidelines but as so called *protonorms*. *Protonorms* are basic humanitarian values which are embedded and furthermore interpreted according to the particular contexts they are applied in (ibid.). They can be seen as a common ground of ethical values of different cultures at a very broad level (Krüger 2004: 12). In this context, Rao and Wassermann (2007: 46) note that "[e]thical values [...] need to be examined and, if necessary, re-interpreted depending on the context and culture to which they are being applied".

Before doing so, the following section outlines a concept of Western media ethics principles. The second part considers the concept of *ubuntu* as a framework for African media ethics principles. Both serve as a theoretical background to explain different interpretations of *protonorms* in the empirical study. Furthermore, it can be seen that *protonorms* already on a theoretical level unify different perspectives on media ethics: both the Western and the South African principles are found partially in the description of the *protonorms*.

Western principles of media ethics

One set of guiding media ethics principles is provided by Black, Steele and Barney (1995: 17): truth-telling, independence and minimising harm. Krüger (2004:12f.) adds a fourth principle: accountability. According to Krüger (ibid.) these values are very widely quoted in media ethics and journalism guidelines.

- "Truth-telling" is split into two major subdivisions: accuracy and fairness. Accuracy means that Journalists should conduct their research and the writing of their stories accurately. Furthermore, fairness applies to truth-telling since "its opposite […] can badly undermine the truthfulness of a report" (Krüger 2004: 13).
- "Independence" means that journalists are obliged to guard the essential role a free press plays in an open society. They should stay free of associations which can harm their credibility (Black, Steele and Barney 1995: 17).
- "Minimising harm" is seen as a reminder that journalism can harm people severely. This is not avoidable in all cases, but should be reduced to the minimum (Krüger 2004: 13).
- "Accountability" stresses the ability of journalists to explain their work to build trust with audiences. It is applied through a strong cooperation with self-regulatory bodies, corrections and the handling of readers' letters (ibid.).

Furthermore, as Gauthier (1999: 200) notes, in the so called "libertarian theory" the press is seen as a "marketplace of ideas" and emphasises privileges of press freedom such as rights of publication. Moreover, in the libertarian worldview rights of the individual are ontologically above the rights of the community, a concept which is drastically questioned by non-Western approaches such as the moral philosophy of *ubuntu* (Christians 2004: 236). As Tomaselli (2003: 429) states: "[*the*] libertarian perspective is most apposite in relatively homogeneous societies with highly developed social, economic and technical infrastructures". It is therefore problematic to use a set of guidelines proposed and interpreted by Western scholars as universal guiding values for journalism ethics (ibid.).

The aforementioned media ethics principles are clearly developed and interpreted by Western scholars and practitioners with an intrinsically Western perspective (Krüger 2004: 12f.). Therefore, they serve as guiding principles for media and

journalism ethics in Western countries – but not necessarily in parts of the world with different cultural backgrounds (ibid.).

Following this argument, another school of journalism ethics suggest that African countries need their own system of ethical values. One of the proposed concepts is *ubuntuism* as a framework for African media ethics – which is outlined in the following section.

South African ethical principles in journalism and media

According to Wasserman (2011: 20) the person most associated with African ethics is Francis Kasoma. The Zambian scholar maintains that the African approach to life has to be taken into account to practise ethical journalism (Kasoma 1994: 8). Tomaselli summarises Kasoma`s position in seeing the media and journalists as a 'guide dog' for citizens rather than a 'watch dog' to control the government (Tomaselli 2003: 430). On the other hand, Tomaselli (2009: 580) criticises Kasoma as assuming culture as "static" and asserts that this postulation "eschews definitions of culture as a dynamic popular process forged in ongoing relationships of resistance and domination".

In this context of African values in ethical journalism, Christians (2004: 241) asserts that the concept of *ubuntu* should be central to South African media ethics. According to Sesanti (2010: 348) the word *ubuntu* comes from the language family of Nguni and is a traditional African concept. It derived from the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means: 'I am a person through other persons' (Blankenberg 1999: 46). This African concept can be seen as a post-colonial process of renegotiating cultural identities as it forms a reaction on Western ethical values, which were applied and dominated during apartheid (Rao and Wassermann 2007: 40).

In *ubuntu* it is not particularly aimed to develop professional ethics but rather to work with "the moral dimension of everyday life" (Christians 2004: 250). Christians (ibid.) states furthermore that "professionals committed to moral literacy reflect the same social and moral space as the citizens they report on". In doing so, moral is understood as being intrinsic to human beings and has to be seen as a general morality rather than ethical principles particularly for journalism (ibid.). Rao and Wassermann (2007: 42) note moreover that "there exist conflicting conceptions of the supposedly universal principles of human dignity and truth" between Western liberal frameworks and the (South) African concept of *ubuntu*. That means that the journalist in *ubuntu* is seen as a member of the community rather than as a spectator and therefore, objectivity, neutrality and detachment are not central in this framework (Fourie 2011: 37).

Deriving from the concept of *ubuntu*, several media ethics principles can be distilled. Although, as aforementioned, *ubuntu* does not aim for professional ethics (Christians 2004: 250) some underlying principles can be found in the theoretical

body of research. As Brislin (2004: 130) suggests, "empowerment" could be one of the guiding principles. He defines it as "the degree to which a society's journalism is designed to empower the citizenry for its own betterment" (ibid.). This definition is in line with the inherent perception of the journalist as being part of the community (Fourie 2011: 37).

Furthermore, "participation", is seen as a key premise of *ubuntu*: it "unites different beings as beings, as substances, without confusing them" (Blankenberg 1999: 43). Christians (2004: 249) asserts moreover, that particularly in *ubuntu* "interaction is stimulated among citizens, between citizens and reporters, and between citizens and politicians." Thus, in *ubuntu* the participation of the audience in journalism is encouraged (ibid.).
"Respect for human dignity" in *ubuntu* "would be understood not only as an individual attribute, but also a community's" (Rao and Wasserman, 2007: 41). That emerges from the historical fact that particularly in South Africa, "communities have been systematically robbed of their dignity as part of apartheid's disregard for human rights" (ibid.). Therefore, this can be seen as a third principle guiding ethical journalism from an African perspective.

However, the concepts show limitations regarding the comparability since a distinct indigenous philosophy is linked to a broad Western perspective. Being aware of this possible problem, the author decided to use these theories since in the Western ideological hemisphere no comparable philosophy to *ubuntu* exists. Furthermore, as outlined above, *ubuntu* is a key concept in South African journalism and media whereas the Western media and journalism is not based on such a distinct concept. To be able to compare both cultural spaces, the Western perspective on media ethics with a libertarian background had to serve as the theoretical concept. In the following section the methodological approach of this article is outlined. Thereby, the method of online surveys, the design of the survey used for this study and the sampling method are presented.

Methodological approach

The aim of the empirical study outlined below is to compare South African and German approaches on the topic of media ethics. To do so, two groups of 25 German and 26 South African students were selected and asked via email to participate in the survey.

Method: online survey

To compare the groups of German and South African journalism students on the topic of media ethics, an online survey with open and closed questions as well as questions on demographics was the method of choice.

Online surveys are generally known to have a number of advantages. First, they have a low level of social desirability (Taddicken 2009: 100). In the context of individual interpretations of ethical principles this is of particular advantage: the students are enabled to interpret the media ethics principles in a private atmosphere and without being influenced by the researcher and by others (ibid.). Furthermore, online surveys can be distributed easily by sending the link to the chosen participants (ibid.: 91). This applies particularly to the study outlined in this article since groups from two countries are compared. Other practical advantages are survey tools like filter questions, automatic randomisation, the technical implementation of ranking questions, etc. (ibid.). The proposed method allows the researcher furthermore to gather data from all members of each group within the given limitations of time and length of the article proposed here.

However, the researcher does only have limited control over the answers given by the participants. Moreover, the external validity can be alleviated since the situation in which the participants answer the questions is decontextualized (ibid.: 102). The anonymous situation, which has a positive effect on social desirability, can lead to less valid answers on social and daily situations of the participant (ibid.). Lastly, technical difficulties such as different displays of the survey in different browsers or a high cognitive stress triggered by reading on a screen can lead to a bias in the data (ibid.: 100).

With regard to this, a more qualitative method such as experts interviews could have been conducted either. However, the researcher decided to use the online survey for the aforementioned advantages and will take possible limitations of this method into account. Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed carefully in order to avoid possible methodological problems. Following, its design is presented with regard to content and technical requirements.

Design of the online survey

The interview questions aim to gather interpretations of the three *protonorms* proposed by Christians et al. (2008: 136): respect for human dignity, truth-telling and nonviolence. In addition to that, the participants were asked to rank seven media ethics principles from Western and South African approaches on ethical guidelines in order to get insight into their personal weighting of these.

The ranking question is set up interactively in the online survey. According to Plaisance (2006: 281), social psychology research suggests that human beings develop a value system which is a hierarchical arrangement of values along a continuum of importance. He (ibid.) furthermore notes that research has produced assessment tools to get more insight into these value systems. One of these tools is the "Rokeach Value Survey", which has been widely used since the 1970s (ibid.). It is a method of ranking a set of 18 values and is used as a base for the ranking question: Firstly, seven values were distilled from the theories outlined above – the four media ethics principles provided by Krüger (2004: 12f.), namely

accountability, independence, minimising harm and truth-telling, as well as three principles from an African cultural perspective: empowerment, participation and respect for human dignity. Secondly, the values were presented in a randomised order and the participants were asked to rank them according to their individual weighting of importance. Thus, the ranking was visually supported by an inclusion of the numbers of the ranks whereby rank one was labelled with "most important" and rank seven was labelled with "least important".

Furthermore, the participants were exposed to questions regarding the interpretations of the *protonorms* outlined in the aforementioned theoretical section. To prepare the participants for this qualitative part of the survey, a page containing an explanation of the following questions was inserted. Proximate, three questions were asked in the same manner: "Please give an interpretation of *[protonorm]. [Protonorm]* means…" The three *protonorms* inserted are respect for human dignity, nonviolence and truth-telling. The researcher expected the participants to give a brief but detailed outline of their understanding of the media ethics principles in the context of their journalistic background.

A set of demographic questions was furthermore added to the survey. Here, the age and gender of the participants as well as their nationality were requested. The university in which the students are enrolled was added as another variable to clearly distinguish the two groups. Moreover, the online survey was distributed in two languages: German and English. All of the South African participants were bilingual with English as their first or second native language. The entire group of German students were native speakers in German.

The participants were allowed to choose their preferred language before starting the survey in order to ensure that every participant was enabled to understand the questions. The translation of the *protonorms* and principles from English into German was conducted by the author. It was checked and discussed with the participants of the pre-test. The questionnaire was furthermore set up with respect to a clear visual design, readability of the questions and the shortest length possible.

In order to test the online survey before distributing it to the selected sample of this study, a pre-test was set up. After completing the pre-test and making minor technical changes, the questionnaire was sent to a sample of two groups by email with three reminding emails per group. The field time for this survey was limited to seven days. The method and realisation of sampling the two groups is outlined in the following section.

Sampling

As aforementioned, German and South African perspectives on media ethics are to be compared and analysed. As outlined in the theoretical section, the national culture serves as a concept to distinguish the perspectives on media ethics. To do

so, two groups from both countries were chosen with a purposive, non-probability sampling method to compare them by using an online survey as outlined above. Maxwell (1997: 87) defines purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which, "particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices". As Teddlie and Yu (2007: 80) note, purposive sampling is frequently used to achieve comparability across "different types of cases on a dimension of interest". According to Teddlie and Yu (2007: 84), purposive samples have the following unique characteristics, which fulfil the needs for the sample of the present study: small sample size, addressing specific purposes related to the research question, focus on in-depth information and small sampling frame.

In line with the sampling method described above, the author selected two groups of students from each country, one from the University of Stellenbosch and one from the University of Hamburg. Both groups are studying Journalism. The German group is enrolled in the "Master of Journalism and Communication Studies" at the University of Hamburg and started the programme in 2010. The South African group is enrolled in the "BPHIL Journalism Programme" at the University of Stellenbosch and started the studies in 2012. Both groups completed a course on media ethics with duration of one semester which made sure that all participants had a comparable level of knowledge regarding theoretical media ethics.

To ensure the best possible level of comparability between both groups, students instead of full-time working journalists were chosen. With this setting, the researcher was able to control the basic parameters such as demographics and the level of knowledge regarding media ethics as good as possible. At both universities the students had to prove that they have basic practical experience in journalism to be able to apply for the programme. Therefore, the general conditions were as similar as possible between both groups so that the interpretations of media ethics principles by individual students could be examined and compared with least possible level of distortive external factors. As described above, demographics, practical experience in journalism and the level of theoretical knowledge of media ethics in both groups were very similar so that the selection of students as the study subjects can be seen as adequate. However, it was not intended to study and examine the different programmes of teaching media ethics in Germany and South Africa.

The purposive non-probability sampling method serves the aim of the present explorative study. Due to the explorative design of the study, the sample is not representative but selective and the results cannot be generalised.

Table 1: Response rate

	Group Size	Responses	Response rate
German group	26	13	50%
South African group	25	15	60%
Total	51	28	55%

As it can be seen in table 1, the online survey generated an average response rate of 55%. The group of South African students responded higher with 60%, whereby 50% of the German students completed the survey. In total, 28 complete surveys were generated. Shih and Fan (2008: 257) assert an average response rate of 34% in their meta-analysis of response rates to online and mail surveys. This can only be seen as a possible point of reference since the percentage of completed questionnaires is influenced by the size and nature of the population, the subject of the questionnaire, etc. (ibid.). However, taking the average response rate of 34% into account, the rate generated in the present study can be seen as sufficient.

In the following section, the findings of the online survey are presented descriptively and according to the aforementioned research questions.

Results

The average age (arithmetic mean) of all respondents was 25.1 years with a standard deviation of $s=2.5$. The group of German (25.3 years) students was in average slightly older than the group of South African students (24.9 years). The largest percentage of students was female (71%) whereas only 29% were male.

In both groups, the respective nationality (German or South African) was constant. As mentioned above, both groups are enrolled in a journalism programme at a university and participated in a media ethics course of one semester.

Ranking of media ethics principles

As named above, one question of the online survey contained a ranking of media ethics principles. As shown in table 2, arithmetical means and standard deviations were calculated: for each of the two groups, the ranks were summed up and divided by the number of participants per group to get an average rank as well as a standard deviation per group per principle.

Using the student's t-test for independent samples, it was tested if the arithmetical means differ significantly between the groups for each of the seven principles. The

two-tailed level of significance indicates whether the differences in the average ranking of the principles are significant (see table 2).

Table 2: Student's t-test on ranking of media ethics principles

(1=highest rank - 7=lowest rank)

Variables/ groups	German group Ranking means (standard deviation)	South African group Ranking means (standard deviation)	two-tailed level of significance
Accountability	4.15 (.519)	3.47 (.737)	.132
Empowerment	6.15 (.987)	5.40 (1.183)	.081
Independence	3.54 (1,266)	4.07 (1.792)	.383
Minimising harm	3.92 (1.320)	3.47 (1.727)	.445
Participation	6.54 (0.519)	6.60 (0.737)	.803
Respect for human dignity	2.08 (1.256)	3.53 (1.685)	.017
Truth-telling	1.62 (0.768)	1.47 (0.640)	.581

As it can be seen in table 2, the principle with the highest rank in both groups was "truth-telling whereas the lowest ranked principle was "participation". Significant differences in the ranking of the principles were found in two cases: the German group of students ranked the principle "respect for human dignity" significantly higher than the South African Group (see table 2). Moreover, the principle "empowerment" was ranked significantly lower in the German group (see table 2). Both groups provided the principles "independence", "minimising harm" and "accountability" with ranks located around the centre of the scale. No significant differences in ranking were to be found between the groups regarding these principles. Furthermore, table 2 shows high values of standard deviations: particularly the principles of "independence", "respect for human dignity" and "minimising harm" show standard deviations higher than 1.

Protonorms

Furthermore, the students were asked to answer three open questions in order to gather interpretations of the aforementioned *protonorms*. The qualitative data collected was structured to summarise similar answers of the participants and to get a systematised overview of the interpretations. In general, the length of the

answers varied from one sentence to several paragraphs. No differences were found between the two groups in terms of length of the interpretations.

a) Nonviolence

Students from the German group foremost maintained a "humane way of journalistic research" as an interpretation of the *protonorm* "nonviolence". Furthermore, several participants revealed the principle of freedom of speech as antagonising "nonviolence": both principles would counteract each other since the freedom of expression should not be limited on the one hand, but people should not be harmed by journalism on the other hand. In several answers this was presented as an ethical dilemma.

The South African group revealed "not to harm the reputation of those involved" as well as "respect of fellow people and the good treatment of their quality of life" and "verbal expression of respect" as central issues of "nonviolence".

Both groups mentioned "no physical violence against informants" and "no threatening, intimidating and blackmailing to get information" as central characteristics of "nonviolence".

b) Truth-telling

The principle of "truth-telling" was interpreted by the German group as follows: all participants mentioned that journalists should always consider at least two sources in the research, which is in German described as the "*Zwei-Quellen-Prinzip*" (principle of two sources). Furthermore, several students mentioned that "every fact has to be questioned" by the journalists, which was by others described as "accountable reporting". Some of the German students stated furthermore that accepting bribes is counteracting the principle of "truth-telling" since it distorts the actual and factual truth.

The group of students from Stellenbosch University interpreted "truth-telling" as "reporting a balanced version of the truth" by "revealing factual evidence" and "working accurately". Stories should furthermore not be "fabricated". Most participants of this group stated that "all possible perspectives on facts" have to be reported since "different versions of truth exist".

Both groups agreed in the following interpretations: they stated that "no bias and personal opinion" can be involved in professional journalism and mentioned the duties to "report all perspectives involved" as well as "check all facts".

c) Respect for human dignity

The group of German students concordantly mentioned that "respect for human dignity" means "not to offend people in general through journalism".

In the South African group, "treating others as you would like to be treated" was the guiding interpretation of this principle. Furthermore, many of the participants mentioned that "respect for human dignity stands with no regard to gender,

nationality, race, age, sexual orientation, level of education, or political views". They moreover mentioned freedom of expression as one of the basic rights of human beings which has to be "executed by journalists and the media".

"Respect for privacy" was in both groups mentioned as an interpretation for the principle of "respect for human dignity". Furthermore, the more general statements of "no harm to other through reporting" as well as "equal rights for everyone" were found in the answers of participants from both groups.

The aforementioned results of the survey are discussed in the following section with regard to the guiding research questions raised in the introduction.

Discussion

The aim of the present article was to explore how journalism students from the University of Hamburg in Germany and the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa interpret widely accepted principles of media ethics, so called *protonorms.*

Ranking of media ethics principles

The first research question asked whether a significant difference in the ranking of principles of media ethics is to be found among the two groups. As the results in the previous section show, two principles of media ethics differ significantly in the average rankings of the two groups: "empowerment" and "respect for human dignity". Hereby, the South African group ranked "empowerment" in average significantly higher than the group of German students. An explanation for this difference could be the emphasis of *ubuntu* – seeing the journalist as part of the community and serving the citizens (Fourie 2011: 37). Tomaselli (2003: 430) furthermore states that media and journalists are seen as a 'guide dog' for citizens rather than a 'watch dog' to control the government. Thus, these two approaches might help to explain why the principle of "empowerment" could be of higher importance among the groups of South African students.

"Respect for human dignity" was ranked significantly higher by the German group. This difference can hardly be explained by using the previously mentioned theoretical background. Assuming that the South African students are influenced by the philosophy of *ubuntu*, it was expected that this group ranks "respect for human dignity" higher than the German group. However, this could be seen as evidence for the existence of *protonorms*: a common ground of ethical values of different cultures at a very broad level (Krüger 2004: 12). Although "respect for human dignity" rather derives from an African perspective on media ethics principles, German students also give value to this principle since it might be seen as a common and universal value.

Furthermore, the results show comparatively high standard deviations for the average rankings of the principles within both groups (see table 2). Particularly in

the South African group the standard deviation values are very high and for each principle higher than in the German group suggesting that the South African group is more heterogeneous with regard to individual weightings of media ethics principles. One possible explanation could be the high diversity of ethnical groups in South Africa. It supports the hypothesis that interpretations and weightings of ethical principles are influenced by the cultural background of the interpreting individuals, as Rao and Wassermann (2007: 46) assert. However, data regarding the ethnicity of the participating students was not collected. Therefore, the aforementioned explanation is hypothetical and cannot be proved with existing data.

However, the question remains if the interpretations of media ethics principles are as similar as the rankings between the two groups or if significant differences will be found. The following section analyses the interpretations gathered in the online survey to gain more insight into possible cultural influences on the perception of media ethics principles.

Interpretations of protonorms

Two research questions were raised regarding the interpretations of *protonorms*: firstly, it was asked whether the two groups differ in their individual interpretations of the *protonorms* and if the interpretations are homogeneous within the groups. The second question was related to a possible explanation of the expected differences in interpretations and weightings of media ethics principles and *protonorms* with the outlined theories on cultural frameworks of each group.

First, the interpretations given by the participants were homogenous within both groups. That means that the in-group-heterogeneity found in the results of the ranking question was not repeated. Furthermore, for each of the *protonorms* substantial similarity in the interpretations of both groups were found as outlined in the previous section. As aforementioned, *protonorms* are seen as a common ground of ethical values of different cultures at a very broad level (Krüger 2004: 12). The common interpretations of both groups could thus be seen as the essence of *protonorms*: the proposed "common ground" (ibid.) on which journalists can agree with no regard to their cultural and historical influences.

However, some major differences between the interpretations of both groups were identified, as outlined in the previous section. Some answers of the South African group reveal clear influences from a background based on African values: for example, the word "respect" was mentioned by many participants as a central issue of "nonviolence". Regarding the principle of "truth-telling", the South African students stated frequently that a balanced version of truth has to be reported since "different versions of truth exist". They furthermore clearly stated that stories should not be "fabricated" and that "accurate work" is essential for journalists. In terms of "respect for human dignity" the Stellenbosch students focused on the

guideline "treat others as you would like to be treated". As mentioned earlier, the journalist in *ubuntu* is seen as a member of the community rather than as a spectator (Fourie 2011: 37). Therefore, the emphasis on respect as well as the acceptance of different versions of truth could derive from the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Christians (2004: 250) states furthermore that journalists in *ubuntu* "reflect the same social and moral space as the citizens they report on". This could be seen as expressed by the South African interpretation of the principle of "respect for human dignity" with the guideline "treat others as you would like to be treated".

The German students revealed the principle of freedom of speech as antagonising "nonviolence": both principles would counteract each other since the freedom of expression should not be limited on the one hand but people should not be harmed by journalism on the other hand. Regarding the principle of "truth-telling", the German group stated that accepting bribes is counteracting the principle of "truth-telling" since it distorts the actual and factual truth. For the principle of "respect for human dignity", the major interpretations of German students were not to offend people in general through journalism. In these interpretations, the four principles proposed by Black et al. (1995: 17) and Krüger (2004: 12f.) are to be found: independence (Black, Steele and Barney 1995:17) in the mentioning of not accepting bribes, minimising harm (Krüger 2004: 13) in not offending people with reporting and accountability in the adherence to freedom of expression.

To summarise, the interpretations of the three *protonorms* by both groups show both mutual and different characteristics. The interpretations are homogenous within and rather heterogeneous between the groups. Furthermore, the differences in the interpretations are to a certain extent explicable with the theories of Western and South African principles of media ethics. These findings give evidence to the theory of *protonorms*: As Christians et al. (2008: 136) noted, *protonorms* should not be understood as transcendent guidelines but as basic humanitarian values which are embedded and furthermore interpreted according to the particular contexts they are applied in (ibid.). That means that groups from different cultural backgrounds should, on the one hand, agree to a certain extent in their interpretations of protonorms – as it was shown above – and, on the other hand, differ in these interpretations according to their individual cultural frameworks.

Concluding remarks

The present study aimed to contribute to the existing research on universal media ethics in conducting an online survey to compare interpretations and weightings of media ethics principles among German and South African journalism students. The aforementioned results of the study suggest that the theory of *protonorms* as proposed by Christians and Nordenstreng (2004: 25) as well as Christians et al.

(2008: 151) is applicable in countries with different cultural frameworks such as Germany and South Africa. That means that the normative, three-dimensional theory Christians et al. (2008: 151) propose can be seen as a new approach for universal media ethics (ibid.).

According to Christians et al. (2008: 151), ethics are not meant to be set of rational *a priori* principles, but should rather emerge out of lived experience (ibid.) and are constantly changing. The present article contributed to a new field of research, interpreting ethical principles of journalism against the background of different cultural frameworks. The *protonorms* could serve as theoretical universal principles, which are to be applied in the various cultural backgrounds existing worldwide. In doing so, ethical principles would emerge from journalistic experiences combined with basic universal frameworks.

Due to an increasing globalised society in which people from various cultural backgrounds live together and in which many people can access media from all over the world, the traditions of the various cultural groups have to be considered in developing and practising media ethics. Ethics urgently have to be de-westernised. They have to start from a common ground which has to be as neutral as possible regarding cultural backgrounds. The *protonorms* could be a new approach trying to find and develop these universal ethical values. As the results of the present study show, this idea seems to be realisable since the students from both countries and national cultures showed a common ground of interpretations of the *protonorms*. On the other hand, a clear influence of both groups by their individual cultural frameworks was to be seen.

However, Rao and Wasserman (2007: 46) state that the current attempts "to incorporate ethical values and concepts from non-Western contexts into the debate about global media ethics [*and*] the overarching framework into which these concepts have been imported remain Western." Christians et al. (2008: 167) furthermore claim that "if news media are to be guided by universal ethics, then journalists need to reconceive their role as major players in cross-cultural discourse." This stands for journalism in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Journalists have to be reconsidered as active inquirers "who should seek to provide nuanced and informed interpretations of their world, while being fully aware of the difficulties of representing others." (ibid.).

The present article attempted to contribute to the aforementioned need to incorporate western and non-western perspectives in a theory of universal media ethics. Due to the small sample, the findings of the present study cannot be considered as representative for South African and German journalists, but rather as an explorative contribution to the interpretation of *protonorms* in different cultures. Also, more attention should be drawn on the specific ethnic backgrounds of the participants and their influence on interpretations of universal ethical values. Questions assessing the ethnicity as well as questions regarding the perception of the individual cultural background of the participants should be considered for further research. Furthermore, the aforementioned problems of

remaining western approaches and the need for an increased awareness of their role among journalists have to be considered and should serve as guiding ideas for further theoretical discussion and empirical research in the field of universal media ethics.

Therefore, further studies should conduct surveys followed by in-depth interviews to gain more insight into the interpretations of *protonorms*. Moreover, bigger samples should be considered and include journalists from several countries, different institutions and in all stages of education. Researchers also have to be aware of their own cultural background which can influence the theoretical point of departure as well as the selection of participants and the overall design of a study. Only in considering this, a complete image of ethical perspectives on the protonorms as well as on challenges deriving from the various cultural backgrounds can be identified and solved.

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