During the Vietnam War, a rift between government officials and journalists emerged. The American government felt the need, for various reasons, to censor many war developments. In an attempt to act ethically, the press fought the censors, trying their hardest to report the truth to the general public. Despite claims of bias and distortion by several prominent government officials, these journalists acted completely ethically, allowing the general public to obtain a fair, informed opinion.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) provides a very clear and thorough Code of Ethics, which serves as a good definition of ethical journalism. According to this code, an ethical journalist must try to minimize any potential harm done to people directly involved with the event being reported. Such a journalist should also act independently of any personal biases, and be responsive to any criticism of their work. Finally, a truly ethical journalist must seek to find and report the truth (Society). Common sense reaffirms these guidelines. When one thinks of ethical behavior, one usually thinks along terms of being truthful, appreciative of others, acting responsively and using fair judgement. All of these concepts are explicitly stated in the SPJ's Code of Ethics.

Minimizing harm done by journalism in times of war is a difficult task. Naturally, there are bits of information that the government needs to keep secret for one reason or another. There is also the danger of victims' stories being exploited and sensationalized. The SPJ's Code of Ethics recommends that journalists should "treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings worthy of respect" (Society). During the extremely controversial Tet Offensive of 1968, the ethicality of journalists in this regard was put to the test. Researcher Clarence Wyatt described this incident vividly. The South Vietnamese had captured and beaten a prisoner. In front of several reporters, Brigadier General Nguyen Loan, who was chief of the National Police, shot and killed the prisoner at point blank range without saying a word. Unbeknownst to Loan, there were cameras rolling as he executed the prisoner. Eddie Adams, a photographer from the Associated Press, took a picture that would later prove to be one of the most memorable images from the war. As if that was not enough, Vo Suu, cameraman for NBC correspondent Howard Tuckner, shot film of the incident. The photo and the film would dramatically shock the general public (Wyatt 165-167).

By reporting this simple event without sensationalizing anything, Adams and Suu gave a classic demonstration of the ethical nature of American Journalism. As Wyatt states,

The photograph and film speak of the presence and characteristics of American journalism. Adams, Tuckner, and Suu were skilled reporters with an instinct for the dramatic incident. The pictures they shot that day were valued examples of that sort of reporting. Adams won almost every possible award that year, and [NBC News executive producer Robert] Northshield hailed the film as "an important and powerful statement of the reality of war" (166-167).

Clearly, this was an example of ethical, mindful journalism. As a result the public was better informed of the reality and emotional issues of war. They were better able to form an opinion on Vietnam.

Considering the political turmoil of the late 1960's, unbiased coverage of important political events was essential. During the famous riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, police in riot gear attacked
several members of the press. As the New York Times reported, "newsmen found themselves special targets of the police action" (Lukas 1). Had these reporters claimed to be victims and acted defensively, the end result would be a severely biased stance. Instead the New York Times' lead editorial two days later read "when clergymen, young women and reporters . . . are beaten by Chicago's police in Chicago's streets, it is not only the image of [then Chicago Mayor] Mr. Daley's fiefdom that suffers; it is the cause of law and order and freedom and democracy" (Mayor Daley's City 32). This editorial was incredibly unbiased and ethical. Rather than writing about the violence and misbehavior in general terms, the New York Times editor took the issue one step further, putting it in the context of liberty and democracy.

These two examples show that the press presented the war to the public without bias for two specific situations. But is this true for the entire war? Colonel Henry G. Gole, who served in Vietnam, believes so. There are many critics of Vietnam War coverage who claim that it biased public opinion against the American cause. Mr. Gole disproves such arguments by showing that the quick change in public opinion in 1968 was due more to a shattered false sense of security instilled by government control of news than by actual journalists' coverage of the war. The leadership tried to present an inaccurate summary of what was going on in Vietnam, and when things weren't going as well as they said, the public became angry. As he puts it, "happy news was reported, and unhappy news was suppressed. The American public had every reason to believe that all was going well in 1968 when the bottom seemed to fall out. . . . Leadership, not the media, had failed to prepare the nation" (Gole 151). So, if the American leadership, not the journalists, facilitated the change in opinion, one would naturally conclude that those journalists did not present the war in a biased manner.

Spiro Agnew, Vice President under President Nixon, disagreed. In a biting speech on November 13 1969, he directly attacked television's coverage of current events. Referring to coverage of a recent speech by Nixon, Agnew claimed that "a small band of network commentators and self-appointed analysts, the majority of whom expressed in one way or another their hostility to what he said" biased their coverage to an audience of millions (Mid-West Regional Republican Committee). One week later, Agnew gave another speech, this time specifically attacking the New York Times. His concern was that the Times chose not to give events that he considered important the coverage that they deserved (Montgomery Chamber of Commerce).

The New York Times gave a fair and impartial analysis of both speeches at once. Among the many editorials and opinion pieces, the Times ran an impartial study on TV News written by Herbert Gans, an MIT sociology professor with no prior connections to the Times, just over a month after Agnew's second speech. Among Gans' many findings was that "the audience plays an infinitely greater role" than the opinions of journalists on what was covered. Apparent biases in the way that television covered the news were merely extensions of what the public generally believed (Gans 224). Since The New York Times acknowledged these criticisms and responded to them with an impartial source, its editors acted in an ethical manner.

The central point of the SPJ Code of Ethics is that journalists should seek to find and report the truth. Finding and reporting the truth was difficult because the government tried to censor the war. Addressing this censorship policy specifically, Clarance Wyatt traces a policy of "diversion and deception" from President Johnson, who attempted to downplay major war developments, through the end of President Nixon's involvement in the war. In attempts to only let the public hear what they were told, the government attempted to withhold important pieces of news (Wyatt 168-215).

Despite this censorship, there were many reporters who attempted to report the war without bias. Edwin Emery noted the coverage of the war by Harrison Salisbury (of the New York Times) during December 1966. As Emery states, "Salisbury's series of stories, filled with detailed observations, directly contradicted much of the claimed success of the US bombing program." Emery then goes on to note that Salisbury "was denied a Pulitzer Prize . . . for what most newsmen conceded was the outstanding news beat of 1966" (622-623). Salisbury was not alone, either. Emery goes on to list journalists such as Peter Arnett of the Associated Press, Ward Just of the Washington Post, R. W. Apple Jr. of the New York Times, Robert Shaplen of the New Yorker, and Denis Warner of the Reporter, each of whom provided a view of Vietnam that was not jaded by the government's
censorship (623). As time progressed, the public's opinion on Vietnam slowly changed, until the vast majority was against the war (Andrews 35-36). Had these and other reporters not sought out and reported the truth, it is doubtful that public opinion would have changed so much. Their form of journalism was clearly ethical.

The preamble to the SPJ's Code of Ethics notes that "conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty" (Society). The press that covered the Vietnam War certainly served the public with thoroughness and honesty. In the face of government censorship and criticism, the press maintained a policy of ethical coverage of the war.

WORKS CITED


WORKS CONSULTED


