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Advocacy Journalism in the Digital Age: Balancing Ethical Implications and Contemporary Realities

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Over the past few decades, journalism has changed tremendously, moving from traditional objective reporting to a more subjective and opinionated approach. Advocacy journalism is a relatively new kind of journalism that tries to further a specific ideology or point of view on social, political, or environmental concerns. Since it was first used in the 1990s, "advocacy journalism" has been the subject of heated discussion. Advocacy journalism aims to advance a specific agenda or point of view on social, political, and environmental concerns. As it attempts to encourage readers or viewers to accept a certain point of view, it is frequently regarded as a type of opinion journalism. To understand advocacy journalism from a theoretical point of view, we will see some definitions of advocacy journalism, how it varies from traditional journalism, and its effects on ethics. Stuart Allan, a Professor at a Journalism school in the U.K, defines advocacy journalism as "A form of journalism that goes beyond reporting to embrace an active commitment to social justice". Allan, in the book "Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis," (Allan, 2013), says that advocacy journalists aggressively promote a particular agenda or cause while also giving individuals whose opinions might not otherwise be heard a forum.

Joel Westheimer, a Professor at the University of Ottawa, and Richard Kahn, a former journalist, in their book, "Advocacy Journalism: A Sourcebook," define advocacy journalism as "Journalism that takes a position on an issue argues for it, and attempts to mobilize public opinion in favor of its position". (Westheimer & Kahn, 1997). They point out that in addition to reporting on events and issues, advocacy journalism may also include reporting on personal opinion and commentary, subjectivity, and interpretation. Author Andrea Wenzel In, her book "Community-Centered Journalism: Engaging People, Exploring Solutions, and Building Trust," defines advocacy journalism as "Journalism that prioritizes serving communities and promoting social justice" (Wenzel, 2021). According to Wenzel, advocacy journalism is grounded in a dedication to upholding the public interest and entails actively interacting with communities and advocating for solutions to social issues. The essential characteristics of advocacy journalism are highlighted by these definitions, which include a dedication to advancing social justice, taking a stand on issues, and actively working with communities to advance social problem solutions. Additionally, they say that advocacy journalism includes some subjectivity and interpretation and may include reporting on events and issues and providing personal analysis and opinions.



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Journalism that promotes an agenda is frequently distinguished from objective, traditional journalism that aims to be neutral and impartial. While advocacy journalism is more subjective and overtly supports a certain point of view, traditional journalism attempts to give objective, balanced reporting on events and issues. In order to captivate their audience and further their cause, advocacy journalists frequently employ passionate language and personal tales. Normative journalism aims to present an unbiased, accurate picture of events and situations. Typical journalists cover news as it happens, giving viewers or readers an accurate and objective image of what is happening. They attempt to avoid taking a stand on subjects because they are educated to report the news as impartially and objectively as possible. The audience is another important distinction between advocacy journalism and normative journalism. A wide audience is what normative journalism strives to target by delivering news and information that is important to everyone. On the other sides, advocacy journalism frequently has a specific audience in mind. Advocacy journalism aims to persuade those who share their viewpoint to take action on the problems they cover regarding how it approaches reporting.

Advocacy journalists frequently concentrate on one side of the narrative, in contrast to normative journalists, who strive to present a fair and impartial view of events and topics. They might present material selectively to promote their viewpoints and employ strategies like emotional appeals. Even though advocacy journalism and normative journalism both aim to inform the public, they approach the task differently and serve different purposes. Advocacy journalism seeks to advance a particular point of view or agenda on social, political, or environmental concerns in contrast to normative journalism, which strives to present an impartial, factual account of events and issues. In order to captivate readers or viewers, advocacy journalism frequently targets a particular group of people and may employ emotive language and first-person stories.

Even though advocacy journalism has been for a long time, there are a number of characteristics that make it particularly pertinent in the current state of journalism. First, the growth of digital media has expanded the field of advocacy journalism. Online news sources and social media platforms give advocacy journalists new venues for raising awareness of their causes and interacting with their readers. Consequently, there has been an increase in citizen journalism and alternative news sources, which frequently place higher importance on advocacy and activism than on conventional journalistic standards like objectivity and impartiality. Second, advocacy journalism has become more prevalent as society and politics become more divisive. A growing number of individuals are turning to advocacy journalists who share their political



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convictions and ideals while traditional news media struggle to preserve their audiences and credibility. People can interact with the news and feel as though they are changing the world through advocacy journalism. And the third point we can say, there are now more options for advocacy journalism thanks to the growth of social justice movements like Black Lives Matter, Me Too, the Dalit movement in India, Farmer's protests in India against farm laws by the Central Union Government of India and climate change activism worldwide.

These movements frequently give marginalized communities 'voices priority and work to affect social change through activism and lobbying'. In order to raise these voices and advance these causes, advocacy journalism is crucial. Fourth, advocacy journalism is now more widely accepted as a result of growing awareness of media bias and the limitations of conventional journalistic practices. Nowadays, a lot of people understand that objectivity and impartiality in journalism are not always possible or desired and that advocacy journalism can be very effective in advancing social justice and holding powerful institutions responsible. Although advocacy journalism is not a new phenomenon, it has gained more importance in the modern era of journalism as a result of the growth of digital media, the increasing polarisation of society and politics, the emergence of social justice movements, and the growing awareness of media bias and the limitations of conventional journalistic practices. Due to these considerations, advocacy journalism now has a new potential to advance social justice, interact with viewers, and made necessary steps toward accountability in powerful institutions.

Depending on the viewpoint of the reader and the topic at hand, advocacy journalism can have either a positive or detrimental effect on society. Here are some examples from the past and present of how advocacy journalism has impacted society: First, the Muckrakers! The muckraking movement of the early 20th century was one of the first instances of advocacy journalism. Muckrakers like Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, and Lincoln Steffens revealed power abuses and corruption in business and government, sparking important social and political changes. Second, the Civil Rights Movement: Advocacy journalism was crucial in exposing the inequities of segregation and discrimination during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Journalists like Ethel Payne, James Baldwin, and Bob Dylan used their platforms to campaign for social change and draw attention to the struggles of Black Americans. Third, the Watergate affair: The Washington Post's Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's investigative reporting was crucial in exposing the Watergate affair and ultimately forcing President Nixon to resign. Their reporting contributed



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to the revelation of power abuses and corruption at the highest echelons of government.

The fourth, Climate Change Activism: In recent years, advocacy journalism has significantly contributed to bringing attention to the pressing need for climate change action. News organizations like The Guardian, Grist, and many more Worldwide have made use of their platforms to encourage climate change activism and hold corporations and governments responsible for their deeds. The fifth, Black Lives Matter Movement: After George Floyd was killed, advocacy journalism played a significant role in drawing attention to systemic racism and police brutality in America. News organizations like The Intercept and The Root have advocated for significant change in the criminal justice system by amplifying the voices of Black activists. Even though advocacy journalism has the potential to be a potent agent for social change, it is also subject to criticism for advocating a specific agenda or ideology and for compromising objectivity and impartiality in the process. Some contend that advocacy journalism damages the media's reputation as a whole and exacerbates social polarization. Others contend that advocacy journalism is essential to advancing social justice and putting pressure on influential organizations. The topic at hand, the individual's perspective, and the larger social and political backdrop are just a few examples of the many variables that affect how advocacy journalism affects society.

Advocacy journalism is frequently considered activism but generally it is different from activism. Activists advocate for social or political change, frequently by participating in rallies, demonstrations, or other direct actions. On the other side, advocacy journalism is a type of reporting that advances a specific viewpoint or agenda regarding social, political, or environmental issues. Even if advocacy journalism could encourage activism, it is not activism in and of itself. Numerous ethical questions are raised by advocacy journalism, notably, those related to veracity, objectivity, and the truth. Its reputation and dependability may be harmed by criticism that advocacy journalism is biased and lacks neutrality. Since journalists are expected to be honest, objective, and trustworthy providers of information, credibility is a crucial issue in journalism. Credibility can be damaged by advocacy journalism if readers think the journalists are promoting a certain agenda or point of view. Readers and viewers may lose faith in the journalist and the media outlet if they think that journalists are only giving one side of the issue. Another important difficulty in journalism is objectivity, as journalists are required to give a fair and impartial portrayal of events and matters. Since advocacy journalism publicly advances a certain point of view or goal, it is frequently criticized for lacking objectivity. Objectivity is a fundamental component of traditional journalism and is necessary for journalists



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to preserve their independence and credibility. Another moral concern in advocacy journalism is the truth since journalists must be careful not to falsify or misrepresent the truth in order to further their viewpoint. In order to support their positions, advocacy journalists may be inclined to exaggerate or publish material selectively, but doing so can damage both their own and the media outlet's reputation.

Over the period of time, there are many debates on advocacy journalism that have significance to understand the nuances in this field of Journalism as well as the field of related academics. Out of these debates, Leepman and Dewey's debate is much more famous and gives an insight into it. The "Leepman and Dewey debate on advocacy journalism" is a fictitious discussion between two people, "Leepman" and "Dewey," about the idea of advocacy media. Instead of upholding neutrality and objectivity in their reporting, advocacy journalism entails journalists or media organizations adopting a position or advocating for a particular cause or point of view. They majorly debated the merits and disadvantages of advocacy journalism, including its effects on media credibility, impartiality, and the function of journalism in society, and are perhaps at the center of the argument between Leepman and Dewey. Leepman is the proponent here. In support of advocacy journalism, Leepman might point out how it has the power to raise awareness of significant social concerns, provide a voice to underrepresented groups, and affect positive change by championing particular causes or beliefs. According to Leepman, journalism should not only comprise reporting the facts; it should also involve taking a stand on issues of societal importance. He may emphasize the necessity for journalists to take a position and utilize their platform to promote social change.

Dewey, on the other hand, might make a case against advocacy journalism by raising issues with its potential for bias, lack of objectivity, and damage to the trust of the media. Dewey might contend that impartiality, truth, and fairness in reporting should take precedence in journalism and that advocacy journalism blurs the line between reporting and activism, undermining the credibility and integrity of the media. Dewey might also voice worries about how advocacy journalism, which can lead to echo chambers and confirmation bias, may further polarise society. The discussion between Leepman and Dewey could touch on a variety of subjects, such as the moral ramifications of advocacy journalism, the influence of the media on public opinion, the obligations of journalists in a democratic society, and how journalism is changing in the digital age. The opinions and justifications advanced by Leepman and Dewey ultimately depend on their unique convictions, principles, and perceptions of the function of journalism in society.



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Philosophical debate over the use of advocacy journalism can be a good overview of understanding advocacy journalism in an ethical and philosophical way. The key issue in the philosophical discussion of advocacy journalism is whether or not it is morally acceptable for journalists to use their reporting to advance a specific goal or ideology. Advocates for advocacy journalism contend that in order to foster constructive social change, journalists must take a position on crucial social and political issues. They contend that advocacy journalism can be a more effective means to advance social justice and hold powerful institutions responsible and that objectivity and impartiality are not always possible or desirable in media. On the other side, those who are opposed to advocacy journalism contend that it damages the credibility of journalism as a whole and that it is not the job of journalists to further a specific goal or philosophy.

They contend that reporting should aim to be fair and objective and that advocacy journalism muddles the distinction between journalism and activism. The issue of what media's place in society should be at the center of the philosophical discussion on advocacy journalism. Some contend that journalism ought to be an impartial spectator of events, giving readers a factual description of what happened. Others contend that journalism needs to be more involved with current affairs, taking a position on significant social and political issues from time to time to highlight the social issue so that there can be a firm voice on these issues to the superpower institution so that they can consider this and take necessary action against it. Ultimately, there are compelling arguments on all sides of the philosophical discussion surrounding advocacy journalism, which is multifaceted and complex. While some could contend that advocacy journalism damages journalism's credibility, others might contend that it plays a crucial role in advancing social justice and keeping powerful institutions responsible. There will probably still be discussion over whether or not advocacy journalism is ethically acceptable in the years to come.

The concerns of objectivity and credibility are crucial while engaging in advocacy journalism. The credibility of journalism as a whole may be harmed by advocacy journalism, according to critics, who claim that it blurs the boundary between news and opinion and compromises journalistic neutrality by advancing a particular agenda or ideology. Advocate journalism's supporters counter that it may advance social justice and hold powerful institutions accountable in ways that perhaps objective media cannot. Specifically talking advocacy journalism worldwide, are many different sides to the discussion of advocacy journalism. Some contend that it may advance social justice and hold powerful institutions accountable, while others assert that it can damage journalism's credibility and impair neutrality. As advocates could be more inclined to



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promote their own account and interpretation of events, the question of truth is also a cause for concern. In order to advance social justice and hold powerful institutions accountable while preserving the principles of impartiality, trustworthiness, and truth, it is crucial for journalists to carefully assess their roles and responsibilities in these areas. Also, it becomes more difficult for journalists to bring out the truth in the confused state of situations due to incorrect statistics and news facts. The question of the veracity of claims is especially problematic because readers may be more inclined to forward their own version of the truth. As a result, it's critical for journalists to think carefully about their role and obligation in advancing social justice and holding powerful institutions responsible while still respecting the ideals of objectiveness, credibility, and truth.

Conclusion:

The validity of advocacy journalism is still up for debate. We can determine that advocacy journalism can be justified on the grounds that it plays a crucial function in society by giving marginalized or underrepresented communities a voice and advancing social justice by analyzing the aforementioned academic and other scholarly literature. Due to a dedication to impartiality and objectivity, traditional journalism frequently fails to effectively cover some topics or fails to take a firm position on divisive issues. By offering in-depth reporting and analysis that emphasizes the perspectives of individuals who are frequently disregarded or marginalized by the mainstream media, advocacy journalism may fill this gap and can show its significance in the near time. Additionally, advocacy journalism can encourage public action by increasing awareness of significant social concerns. Advocacy journalists can aid in mobilizing people to demand change and hold those in power accountable by bringing attention to injustices and inequality. This may result in significant social and political changes that tackle underlying issues and enhance the quality of life for marginalized groups. However, it is crucial to remember that advocacy journalism should not only be motivated by personal prejudices or goals but also by factual reporting and ethical standards. Even as they take a position on issues and advocate for particular viewpoints, advocacy journalists must work to be accurate, transparent, and fair. By keeping these guidelines in mind, in coming years advocacy journalism may be a potent weapon for furthering democratic values and social justice.



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