

Core issues in ethics for journalism and media management

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SUMMARY

The three core issues when talking about journalistic ethics are truth, independence, and the understanding of consequences of the journalistic and media action. Truth, always to be re-examined, is the essential part of the ethics of journalism. Independence both from outside forces of politics and society, as well as from internal editorial or ownership pressures, is the second core value. Lastly, understanding and caring for the consequences of journalistic action need to be taken into account as the third most important issue around which any debate on the ethics of journalism must revolve. Management strategies in the media need to reckon with the need for dialogue, consultation, and bargaining within the industry, so as to never lose sight of the fact that the media serve not primarily for profit, but for wider goals.

The critical issue for journalists, not just here in Croatia but throughout this region and around the world, is the question of the rights and responsibilities of journalists, the role of journalists and the contribution they make to press freedom. The notion of the importance of the ethics of journalism is in the forefront of debates on how journalists can establish a profound respect for ethical conduct, not only within journalism, but also within society as a whole. And it is a very important issue. I do think that recent developments in Serbia give us hope and open a window of opportunity. Maybe it is a short period, but an opportunity exists to really reinforce efforts to create a culture of media freedom and journalistic independence in this region and to build upon the

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good work that has been done in Croatia in recent years and the progress that has been made.

I want to say just one or two things before I introduce my panel. When we talk about ethics, there is an awful lot of complex jargon and debate, and very often academic discussions explore what journalistic ethics really is and what it means.

I always say that I could paper the walls of my office with the declarations and statements and codes of conduct coming from journalists associations or professionals from all over the world, but when you look at all of these declarations, ethical questions boil down to three fundamental issues.

The first is the question of the journalists' obligation or duty to truth, their respect for truth, recognising that truth is at the core of the work that we do, and seeking truth even through truth cannot be guaranteed, but it can be changed, reshaped and redefined. Nevertheless, seeking truth remains our core preoccupation.

Secondly, it's the question of independence. Journalists have to be independent. When we speak about independence, we mean external independence: independence from external pressure, from political sources, from social groups, from others outside journalism who wish to manipulate and to control it. This independence is extremely important.

We also need to have independence from internal pressures. The media we know these days are a complex and expanding business. Internal pressures on journalists are very strong: the pressure to have a high circulation, the pressure to have a strong audience reach the pressure to improve the commercial prospects of the company. These internal pressures compromise independence.

And, finally, all of this is always based upon the personal and professional independence of the journalists themselves, the personal capacity of the journalist to have the confidence to say I'm independent, I have a right here, I will defend my ethics in a certain way. Thus, independence is also a core issue.

The third aspect of any ethical discussion has to do with the question of journalists being aware of the consequences of what they do. The consequences of what we write, what we broadcast, have to be part of the consideration whenever we decide to publish something. Sometimes it is necessary, particularly in the interests of public security and public welfare, for us to say that the consequences, the potential consequences, of what we do may force us not to publish, at least at this moment. Or maybe we should publish something different. That is a core ethical question – to be aware of the consequences. The consequences of what the media did, what journalists did, had devastating effects on the lives of thousands of people in this part of the world eight to nine years ago or less. So, hate speech warmongery. The consequences of what journalists do, have to be one of the major and primary considerations.

So these are the three issues, I believe, around which any debate about ethics eternally revolves: truth, independence and the consequences of what we do. These are the issues that we need to look at, and there are various aspects of it. To what extent is training important? To what extent is regulation or self-regulation an issue? How do we develop a culture of democracy within the media? And so on.

From my point of view, from the International Federation of Journalists point of view, we believe absolutely in trying to create the best possible conditions for the social, professional and editorial independence of journalists. This means that we want our journalists to have the confidence to say to politicians – no; to advertise and commercial interests – no. And even, if necessary, to have the confidence to say to the employer and to the editor – no. The important thing is to create the professional conditions where journalists will have the confidence; to be able to say – no. Or, as is also often the case, to say – yes. This is really one of the issues that I think is at the core of what we are looking at.

Journalistic principles and media management

I just wanted to raise one or two general questions that I think are extremely important, because this is the panel looking at the media and the market economy. Following on the discussion about the media and their responsibilities and rights, their responsibility to society and to quality, we now come to this very important question. I want to pick up some issues that managers have the responsibility to consider these days. My concern as a representative of the journalists is that somehow the process of management is seen (and here I'm going to quote what Aralyn said this morning) as one which is first of all glazed towards the professional requirement to make a profit. Unless you make a profit, you cannot indulge in the luxury, shall we say, of freedom of expression and opinion. You cannot do these things. I respect and have always respected, the evolution of the modern media, which seek to strike a balance between the need for efficient management and the making of a return on investment, but also the need to maintain the special social, cultural and democratic quality of media products in a democratic society. The essence of journalism, which distinguishes media products from other products in a market economy, is extremely important. The problem is, I believe, that a long held balance has been upset in recent years, and unless we are very careful the future management will see the pursuit of profit as a professional imperative, as the only motive for producing newspapers and other media products. It must be remembered that the first publishers were not people who sought to make a profit. The first publishers were people who were journalists seeking to guarantee their freedom of expression and their right to have alternative opinions put forward. That essential root from which the modern media developed should never be forgotten in the process of developing new strategies for management. Therefore, one of the things which is very important is that media management today must see as their absolute priority the creation of a stable, open, accountable internal environment in which all players in a media operation work together. This means dialogue, consultation, bargaining. It means the creation of a stable framework in which each person knows his or her role, his or her responsibilities and rights. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate for modern management to refuse to negotiate with trade unions who represent journalists. It is not the role of modern management to say that the editor's responsibility is to the management and not to the journalists. The editor is a crucial person in this difficult and complex arrangement of management. Who is the editor? Is he the

first among the journalists, or the last on the board of directors? Where in the last analysis does the editor's responsibility lie? With the medium, with the quality, or with the board of management. It is this conflict, in a global industry, which is expanding dramatically, and in which commercial interests are driving the process further and further, which is being called into question today.

I used to work for The Guardian, which is a very good newspaper. It is one of those newspapers, which pride themselves on having a fairly accountable and democratic structure. They say they elect the editor; they don't actually, but they get close to it. They have a good consultation process because they ask the journalists what they think. I don't think that journalists make good managers, on the whole; we can be good as writers, as broadcasters, but I don't believe we are good at counting the beans, therefore we need good professional management. But we also need to know in the end what the objectives are. C.P. Scott, the founder of the modern Guardian, when faced with a very big and crucial issue, took a firm stand. I recall very well, when there was a debate about the future of the newspaper. The Guardian took a position on a major issue, which was against the government of the day, and it has done the same on various occasions over the years, for instance in the Suez crisis. The government decided to be party to the invasion of Egypt in the 50's, while the Guardian said no, lost circulation, deliberately said we are against this. Scott summed up the role of the paper and its commitment to professionalism in a very succinct way. He said: Better extinction than a failure of principle. The problem today is better a failure of principle than any question of extinction. That is the motto that unfortunately drives much of modern management. One needs only to read the stories and biographies of the editors who served under major figures like Rupert Murdoch. The debate in the United States at the moment is about financial and advertising people exerting influence in the newsroom. The problem is that commercial imperatives drive the media process, rather than professional interests. My thesis is a very simple one. It is essential to the democratic development of the media to have good, efficient and open management, and there is nothing wrong in making a profit. In fact, professional journalists will respect very much the need for good efficient management and the need to make a profit. What they do not accept, and are right to be concerned about, as should be the whole society, is the situation where we believe that economic issues will always take precedence. Therefore, the discussion that goes on in Croatia and elsewhere about a new management strategy should, in my view, cover collective agreements with journalists and people who work in the media and set minimum social standards. I say this because we are moving into a new period, as I said earlier, where a window of opportunity is opening. During the recent period, journalists and other people who work in the media, both in public and private, have been treated extremely badly. I have just returned from Serbia, and while there I conducted a small survey of the salaries of people working in the independent media often supported by the international community, and the public media. Average salaries of journalists range between 70 and 120 DEM a month. This is hardly enough to buy a pair of shoes in a Belgrade shop. The fact of the matter is that journalists have to have other jobs. They also need have support from their families. They work in very difficult circumstances. And the media say we have

no choice. Journalists and the rest of the population have to suffer while we are going through this political process. This is one thing. But when we move into a new period, when we begin to talk about the development of the market, it is time to say that we must heighten the social and professional status of journalists. If the status of journalists is not improved in terms of their social status in terms of the rewards that are available to them, this will be an invitation to more pressure, and more corruption internally within the media. Any process of development of management strategies must, in my view, carry with it an obligation for new structures for dialogue, consultation, and bargaining within the industry.

Aidan White

Temeljna pitanja etike u novinarstvu i upravljanju medijima

SAŽETAK

Tri temeljna pitanja kada je riječ o novinarskoj etici jesu istina, neovisnost i razumijevanje posljedica novinarskih i medijskih postupaka. Istina, koju uvijek treba preispitivati, najbitniji je dio novinarske etike. Neovisnost kako o vanjskim političkim i društvenim silnicama tako i o unutarnjim uredničkim ili vlasničkim pritiscima jest druga bitna vrijednost. Konačno, razumijevanje i briga o posljedicama novinarskih postupaka treba uzeti kao treći među najvažnijim pojmovima oko kojih se mora kretati svaka rasprava o novinarskoj etici. Upravljačka strategija u medijima mora voditi računa o potrebi dijaloga, dogovaranja i pregovaranja unutar svoje branše, kako ne bi nikada izgubili iz vida činjenicu da mediji ne služe primarno profitu, nego daleko višim ciljevima.