Journalism Ethics

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The following discussion topics were asked and answered by panelists:

1. What is ethics?
2. What are journalism ethics?
3. New Media ethics?
4. How can we improve ethics training in journalism schools?
5. How can we improve ethical reporting on children and other vulnerable groups?
6. How can we bridge the gap between theory and practice in ethics?
7. What is the relationship between industry ethics and journalism?
8. Should we design course outlines for media ethics?

What is Ethics?

It was defined as a reflection process that is rule-oriented and puts moral values into practice. It also involves a rational choice between what is right (good) and what is wrong (bad). One panelist defined it as a branch of philosophy that prescribes what is right and what is wrong. It was also defined as a "field that deals with nearly an endless array of gray areas where issues and appropriate courses of action are not clearly demarcated."

Journalism Ethics?

It incorporates normative rules such as rigour, objectivity, balance, dignity, public interest, etc. Bringing ethics into practice is a complex process that has to do with moral fitness and the politico-economic context in which journalism is practiced. The application of moral philosophies is context specific. It involves considerations such as how applicable moral philosophies are and when to apply them. Ethical questions tie into the core of the practice of journalism itself. After all, journalists must constantly evaluate what material should be published and what material should not.

The five moral philosophies underlying present-day journalism ethics were singled out as follows: Christians (1983:9) identifies five ethical principles that have historically provided guidance on moral decisions. These are:

- **Aristotle's Golden Mean:** This principle rests on the assumption that virtue lies between two extremes. Thus, a morally upright journalist is neither the one who is a coward nor bashful. Aristotle emphasises moderation for appropriate actions.
- **Emmanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative (Deontology):** "Act on that maximum by which you will to become a universal law." This principle emphasises that "what is right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions" (Christians, 1983:11). If, for example, a journalist is convinced that publishing a particular story is the right thing, then he or she must go ahead and damn the consequences.
- **Mills Principle of Utility: (Teleology)** is based on the philosophy that man must "seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number." In other words, what is right is that which pleases the greatest number of people in a nation. Christians observes that this ethical view is widespread in American society, which is characterised by hedonism – the perpetual search for pleasure.
- **Rawl's Veil of Ignorance: (Contractualism)** "Justice emerges when negotiating without social differentiation." This principle rests on Rawl's principle that fairness is a fundamental tenet of justice. In a sense, justice is viewed as a "cloistered virtue" that is blind to social status, color or creed. All people must be treated fairly without fear or favor. Being morally blind means that the media do not treat the powerful in society as sacred cows. All creatures, great and small, ought to be subjected to the same moral standards.
- **Judeo-Christian philosophy:** People as ends in themselves: This "love your neighbor as yourself" principle views all human beings as standing under one moral virtue. Love is viewed as more than a raw principle, stern and unconditional (Christians, 1983:16). The unconditional love due to humanity makes it immoral for anyone to use human beings for the purpose of achieving certain ends. Loving one's neighbor is a practical action that entails helping those who need help, such as the weak, the poor, orphans, widows, aliens, the disenfranchised and society's downtrodden. This principle exhorts media practitioners to use their privilege to highlight the plight of the poor and needy in society.

NB: The issue of **Africanisation of journalism ethics** was mentioned as important in light of post-colonial settings. **Ubuntu, Afriethics and Communitarianism** are important moral philosophies in this regard.

New Media Ethics

The Fifth Estate (new media) was singled out as presenting numerous challenges. Our questions included: Should we transform traditional journalism ethics in light of the proliferation of new media technology? Is it time to rethink the whole discourse of ethics that has served the media prior to the emergence of the Fifth Estate? It was noted that new media technology reconfigures the whole notion of who a journalist is and who can produce content. It also challenges the gatekeeping role that in the era of traditional media was occupied by editors and sub-editors. The gatekeeping role of editors to ensure quality control has been subverted in a free-for-all set up enabled by web 2.0. Instead of producers, we can talk of

'prosumers' and 'produsers.' It was pointed out that in the era of new media, many people are content producers and actively involved in the production of content of some sort online. The need for training to become journalists is seriously threatened by the emergence of new media.

The use of Facebook content by journalists was mentioned as presenting serious ethical challenges, especially in Kenya. It was seen as tantamount to invasion of privacy. It brings the discussion of the private-public sphere into serious focus. The blurring of the two spheres leads to revisionism of traditional journalism ethics. Incidences were mentioned of journalists plagiarizing from the internet. In the era of instantaneous storytelling, which mutates from breaking news to developing news in a matter of minutes, it was pointed out that time for serious editing is now limited and has serious consequences for the final journalistic product.

Improving Teaching of Journalism Ethics in our Schools

The case study method was identified as the best method for teaching and examining media ethics in journalism schools. It involves the use of real- life news stories as illustrations during class room interactions with students. Students are made to comment on moral dilemmas and evaluate the judicious adherence to normative rules by practising journalists. It was emphasized that since most of the theoretical underpinnings and branches of philosophy informing media ethics courses are Western-bound, it was important to use local examples in order for students to apply these issues to their own contexts. It was also suggested that examinations at the end of the course must be case-study centered with higher demands of applying theory to practice. Thus the localization of case studies was seen as of paramount importance. However, it was noted that ethical behavior has to do with the individual. Lectures can only transform one's ethical fitness to a certain extent. Panelists suggested that generally students can recite the ethical theories and normative rules of journalism, although in some instances they are re-socialised into organizational cultures that can be described as "anti-ethical." The industry in this case was singled out as liable in some cases of teaching journalists how not to practice journalism through the commodification of news. The politico-economic context is another crucial determinant of responsible or ethical journalism. Issues such as remuneration and poor working conditions were identified as crucial.

Industry, Ethics and Journalism

How do we prepare our journalists to fit into the industrial set-up with its own organizational and cultural dynamics? It was stressed that professional journalism rises and falls on credibility. Journalists must realize that if they act unethically, they are shooting themselves and their organizations in the foot. Ethical behavior was seen as more than the "feel good" factor. After all, good journalism is good business. Journalists find themselves in an intercalary position due to pressures associated with media organizations, such as deadlines and competition. Panelists suggested that the internal logic of the media requires interrogation. The political economy of the media is also a contributor to ethical and unethical journalism. Some media organizations do not offer a conducive environment for

students to showcase what they have learned about ethics. There is a problem with focusing on substance (media content) as a barometer of ethical fitness. There is need to interrogate the method of news gathering and news values.

Do journalists use ethical instruments to collect their stories? Some journalists use unorthodox news-gathering techniques to come up with newsworthy articles that are in the public interest. Investigative and embedded journalism are examples. The use of language was also raised as pertinent since it amplifies unethical journalism, especially in Zambia. *The Post*, a Zambian newspaper, was used to illustrate a newspaper using language to promote defamatory statements. Can we measure the ethical fitness of a newspaper based on its tone or its language used? Another issue related to the use of local languages is when, during television and radio phone-in programs, callers denigrate and malign others. What are the ethical challenges related to the use of language? It was suggested that journalists must ensure they tell their audience how they collected their news.

The use of media ombudsmen was seen as problematic since this process lacks sanctioning powers. Co-regulation (self and State regulation) was highlighted as a better option in certain instances as it allows industry and government to police ethical adherence. As long as the ombudsman system does not criminalize, then it's a toothless bulldog. It was also noted that some editorial policies are not in tandem with codes of ethics. Some media organizations were described as putting ideological and political leanings to the forefront, while neglecting the broader ethical concerns of the profession. Some media organizations have devised subtle ways to subvert ethical guidelines by using strategic devices, such as quoting anonymous and authoritative sources. By hiding the identity of a source, although allowed by law, some are over-stepping an ethical line. Moreover, the selection of sources is another strategy to maintain a pre-determined editorial stance.

Ethics Concerning Reporting on Children and Other Vulnerable Groups

It was unanimously agreed that children must be protected. They are innocent, vulnerable and ignorant of the workings and oppression of the media. Any professional journalist must seek consent of the guardian of a child before soliciting information. Even in a school set-up, administrators must refer the issue to the parents or care-givers before proceeding with interviewing, photographing, etc. Different countries have different laws defining who a child is. Names of minors/children implicated in crimes must not be disclosed except in extraordinary situations. However, journalism ethics on covering children are sometimes dicey, especially in complex situations in which the child is a perpetrator of crime. The issue of the use of children in political advertisements was also discussed. The ethics of such situations depend on the message that the child is being used to project and whether their parents have been consulted prior to the shooting of the advertisement. Even children of corrupt politicians are still protected by law. Journalists have no right to invade the privacy of children due to their parents' wrong-doings. By law, all children, regardless of the status of their guardians, are innocent.

Another issue discussed focused on the reporting on HIV and AIDS and People living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHAs). Some reportage promotes stigmatization against PLWHAs and perpetuates discriminatory practices. Discussants stressed that journalists must desist from perpetrating "victimhood" stereotypes. The issue of covering faces of photographed people in the media was described as equally unethical since it can allow people to identify the person by association. Participants also brought up LGBTI (GLBT) communities for discussion. Hate speech was singled out as prevalent in most African countries still harbouring homophobic tendencies. The use of hate speech is dangerous because it sets up a group of people for ridicule, stigmatization, and discrimination.

Franz Kruger (2005) has discussed coverage of HIV, AIDS and PLWHAs in-depth in the context of South Africa. He identifies the ethical norms that should be followed when covering such topics:

1) Truth-telling

The first and most basic principle is accuracy. In the context of HIV and AIDS, this means that journalists need to be very careful about the science involved, which is sometimes very complex. Also, we often write about statistics, and again journalists need to be careful to get them right. In a broader sense, the truthtelling principle means telling the story fully and giving it due weight. This involves a number of things. It means reporting the pandemic in a nuanced way, and investigating the social, medical, personal, scientific, economic, educational, political and other aspects of the issue. That kind of balance won't be achieved in a single story, but it can be achieved over time.

2) Independence

Keep a distance from various players in order to be able to report honestly. This includes government officials, particularly those in countries that own or dominate broadcasting and other media.

3) Minimize harm

The media can cause significant harm. Established ethics call for harm to be minimized when possible. Some kinds are unavoidable or even justifiable. For example, a corrupt official may be harmed by the exposure of his misdeeds, but this harm is far outweighed by the benefit gained by the broader public.

4) Privacy

This right is enshrined in many constitutions. It is a legal right and an ethical duty. In concrete terms, it means taking great care when it comes to reporting on people's status. Their story, the way their families deal with their situation, medical details, photographs – all of this belongs to their private sphere, over which they have control. This issue has a particular slant when, as is so often the case, journalists deal with **people who are poor and disadvantaged**. Journalists need to take particular care not

to bulldoze people, pushing them into doing something they may not really want to do. That said, strong public interest can trump the right to privacy. This point is recognized in various ethical codes as well.

In short, Kruger (2005) identifies the following principles on reporting HIV and AIDS:

1) Accuracy is critical, since important personal and policy decisions may be influenced by media reports. Journalists should be particularly careful to get scientific and statistical information right.
2) Clarity means being prepared to discuss sex, cultural practices and other sensitive issues openly and respectfully.
3) Balance means giving due weight to the story and covering all aspects, including medical, social, political, economic and other issues. It means focusing on the gender dimension, particularly, and reporting on the larger social forces driving the pandemic. Balance also means highlighting positive stories where appropriate, without underplaying the fact that HIV and AIDS is a serious crisis.
4) Journalists should ensure that the voices of people living with HIV and AIDS are heard. The human face of the pandemic should be shown.
5) Journalists should hold the powerful accountable in their handling of the pandemic.
6) Independence means keeping all interest groups – such as government, the pharmaceutical industry and advocacy groups – at arm's length and avoiding any perception of a conflict of interest.
7) Discrimination, prejudice and stigma are very harmful, and journalists should avoid fueling them. Particular care should be taken not to use language that reinforces stereotypes.
8) Journalists should respect the rights of people with HIV and AIDS. Vulnerable people, such as children, and those not used to the media should be treated with particular care. Journalists should seek their informed consent before intruding on their privacy. Only in cases where public interest is strong and clear should somebody's HIV status be reported against his wishes.
9) Dangerous misconceptions should be debunked, and any claims of cures or treatments should be reported with due skepticism.

Interface Between Law and Ethics

Some participants mentioned that often times law and ethics cross each other's path. This point relates to privacy, which is both a moral and legal issue in most democratic jurisdictions.

Bridging Theory and Practice

It was suggested that a number of factors complicate the translation of theory into practice. For instance, the financial imperatives of the media make it difficult for journalists to toe the ethical line. It is important to ensure journalists uphold ethics no matter where they are working in the private and public media.

Related to this issue was a discussion on the suitability of describing journalism as a profession. The argument was that journalism does not meet the sociological prerequisites of a profession. Although journalists describe themselves as professionals, they shun licensing – they do not have their own handbooks, and their codes lack sanctioning power.

A profession exists for the public. Its legitimacy is derived from the society in which professionals practice. Reporters are not on the same wave-length as accountants or doctors in terms of professional barometers. Journalists can be described as "employees" of media owners as opposed to the self-legitimizing claim of professionals. In Africa, for instance, journalism was described as not fully professionalized. This lack of professionalism was identified as hampering the mainstreaming of ethical/responsible journalism. The question asked: How do you get journalists to account to their own codes of ethics? Voluntary adherence has been shown to be ineffective. Another question: How does the public make journalists accountable? Letters to the editors and complaints to the media ombudsman were seen as ineffective. Press councils as systems of media accountability remain weak. Overall, participants concluded that different media accountability systems have loopholes related to enforcement and monitoring.

Model Course Outline/Syllabus for Media Ethics

Case study method:
Journalism ethics are difficult to observe in a country without press freedom. No press freedom, no journalism ethics. The two co-exist and mutually reinforce each other. However, even in authoritarian political systems the media ought to be ethical for the sake of the public, not authorities.

NB: Different people take different theoretical approaches to make ethical choices. One can base his choice on contractualism, while another can deploy the consequentialist moral philosophy. The two journalists are bound to arrive at different ethical decisions and choices.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course alerts students to ethical issues that arise in the media and that have a bearing on decision-making with regard to media content. It also provides examples of journalistic Codes of Conduct, which emphasize professional behavior and standards within the journalistic profession.

COURSE OBJECTIVE

Intended Learning outcomes (ILOs)

Upon completion of this course, the student shall be able to:

- Identify and apply ethical approaches in the media.

- Illustrate understanding of ethics, codes and regulations.
- Identify and analyse theories of ethics.
- Discuss the relationship between ethics and constitutional rights and freedoms.
- Solve ethical dilemmas in the profession.

COURSE CONTENT:

WEEK	COURSE CONTENT	DATES of TEST; ASSIGNMENTS, PEER EVALUATION
1.	- The Role of the Journalist - Definition of Ethics - Ethical Theories - Ethics and Moral Reasoning - Media Theories	
2.	- Political Systems - Types of Political Systems - Characteristics of Political Systems - The Law: Media Codes of Ethics - Concepts of Freedom of Expression - Bad Language, Hate Speech, Violence, Pornography, Nudity	
3.	- Ethics in the Newsroom - Ethical Decision-making - Structure of Ethical Decision-making	
4.	- Accuracy - Potter's Box - Fairness - Objectivity - Plagiarism - Fabrication	

5.	• Reporter/Source Relationships • Confidentiality • Truth and Deception • Self-censorship	
6.	• Conflict of Interest • Loyalties: individual, group, organisation, profession, • Cheque book-journalism	
7.	• Invasion of Privacy • Trauma	
8.	• Stereotyping	
9.	• Truth and Deception • Photojournalism	
10.	• Diversity • How to Report Ethically on HIV and AIDS	
11.	• Public Relations and Ethics • Advertising and Ethics	
12.	• Social Responsibility in the media • The challenges of the Information Age • Challenges of Ethics in New Media	

TEACHING/LEARNING STRATEGIES

- "Straight" lectures (students are expected to take notes)
- Practical case studies
- Assignments and tests
- Assigned readings
- Discussions (students are encouraged to participate in class discussions)
- Role play
- Individual or group class presentations
- Industry-based project.

LIST OF RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Prescribed Text Book:

- Retief, John: Media Ethics – An Introduction to Responsible Journalism, 2002. Oxford University Press Southern Africa. Cape Town.
- Ukpabi, Chudi. Handbook on Journalism Ethics: African Case Studies. 2001. MISA.

RECOMMENDED WORKS:

- Louis A. Day: Ethics in Media Communications: Cases and Controversies, USA
- Jay Black et al 1999. Doing Ethics in Journalism. 2nd Edition. Allyn and Bacon, USA
- Fink, Conrad. Media Ethics. 1995. Allyn and Bacon, USA
- Francis Kasoma, 1994. Journalism Ethics in Africa, Johannesburg, Raven Press.
- Karikari, K. (1996) Ethics in Journalism: Case studies of practice in West Africa. Accra: Ghana University Press.

Websites

- http://poynter.org/dj/tips/index.htm
- http://www.jmme.byu.edu
- http://www.ethics.ubc.ca/resources/media
- http://www.uta.fi/ethicnet
- http://www.elon.edu/andersj/ethics.html
- http://www.journalism.indiana.edu/ethics

Conclusion

In conclusion, enforcement and licensing were singled out as major impediments to dealing with ethical transgressions in many societies. Using statutory regulation is tantamount to gagging the media, especially in Africa and Asia. Self-regulation remains a viable option for the media industry, although politicians are skeptical of a self-policing "Fourth and Fifth Estate." The best option is co-regulation, a recent phenomenon, which is prevalent in Western societies. However, co-regulation relies on voluntary adherence, which again is a non-starter in some democratic jurisdictions. Truth-telling is at the heart of our function as journalists, and it is the foundation for all our ethical decisions.

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