Journalism Ethics Panel

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The following topics were suggested by panellists:

1. What is ethics?
2. What are journalism ethics?
3. New Media Ethics
4. How can we improve ethics training in journalism schools
5. Ethics around reporting on Children and other vulnerable groups
6. How to bridge the gap between theory and practice in ethics
7. Industry ethics and Journalism
8. Designing course outlines for media ethics

What is ethics?

It was defined as a reflection process, rule-oriented and putting moral values into practice. It also involves a rational choice between what is right (good) and what is wrong (bad). One panellist defined it as a branch of philosophy which 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:

Incorporates normative rules such as rigour, objectivity, balance, dignity, public interest etc. It was pointed out that bringing ethics into practice is a complex process which has to do with moral fitness and politico-economic context in which journalism is practiced. The application of moral philosophies is context specific. It involves the questions how applicable? And when to apply those moral philosophies? At the core of the practice of journalism are questions such as: what is worth publishing and what is not and which parts of a story should not be published.

The five moral philosophies undergirding present day journalism ethics were singled as including the following: Christians (1983:9) identifies five ethical principles which 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 the 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 predicted on the philosophy that man must 'seek 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' which is blind to social status, colour or creed. All people must be treated fairly without fear or favour. 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.

- **The Judeo-Christian**-Persons as Ends: This "love your neighbour 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 neighbour is a practical action that entails helping those who need help such as the weak, the poor, orphans, widows, aliens, the disenfranchised and the downtrodden in society. 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. The question was: should we transform the 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 firth estate? It was noted that new media technology reconfigures the whole notion of who is a journalist and who can produce content. It also challenges the gatekeeping role which 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, a lot of 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 cases where journalists plagiarise from the internet. In the era of instantaneous storytelling which mutate 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 given that most of the theoretical underpinnings and branches of philosophy informing media ethics courses, 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 centred with higher order demands of applying theory to practice. Thus the localisation of case studies was seen as of paramount importance. However, it was noted that at the end of the day, ethical behaviour has to do with the individual. Lectures can only transform one's ethical fitness to a certain extent. Panellists suggested that generally students can recite the ethical theories and normative rules of journalism, although in some instances they are resocialised into organisational cultures which can be described 'anti-ethical'. The industry in this case was singled out as liable in some cases of teaching journalists how not to do journalism through commodification of news. The politico-economic context is another crucial determinant of responsible or ethical journalism. Issues such as remuneration and bad working conditions were identified as crucial.

Industry, ethics and Journalism

The question was: how do we prepare our journalists to fit into the industrial set up with its own organisational and cultural dynamics? It was stressed that professional journalism rise and falls on credibility. It was noted that journalists must realise that if they act unethically then they are shooting themselves and their organisations into the foot. Ethical behaviour was seen as more than the feel good factor. It is broader than the feel good factor because good journalism is good business. It was acknowledged

that journalists find themselves in an intercalary position due to pressures associated with media organisations such as deadlines and competition. Panellists suggested that the internal logics of the media require interrogation. The political economy of the media is also a contributor to ethical and unethical journalism. Some media organisations do not offer conducive environment for students to showcase what they have learnt on ethics. It was pointed out that 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 which are in the public interest. Investigative and embedded journalism are examples in this case. The use of language was also raised as pertinent in so far as it amplifies unethical journalism especially in Zambia. The Post (a newspaper in Zambia) was used as an example of a newspaper using language to promote defamatory statements. Can we measure the ethical fitness of a newspaper based on the tone or language used? Another issue related to the use of local languages during television and radio phone in programmes to 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 readers the methods used to collect their news if it is in the public interest.

The issue of media ombudsperson was seen as full of loopholes in so far as the system lacks sanctioning powers. Co-regulation (self regulation and State) was highlighted as a better option in certain instances as it allows industry and government to police ethical adherence. As long as the ombudsperson system does not criminalise, then it's a toothless bulldog. It was noted that some editorial policies are not in tandem with codes of ethics. Some media organisations were described as putting ideological and political leanings to the fore-front while neglecting the broader ethical concerns of the profession. It was noted that some media organisations have devised subtle ways to subvert ethical guidelines by using strategic devices such as quoting anonymous and authoritative sources. Hiding the identity of the source although allowed at law, some are over-stepping the 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 at most ignorant of the workings and oppressions of the media. Any professional journalist must seek consent of the guardian of the child before soliciting information. Even in a school set up, administrators must refer the issue to the parents or carers before proceeding with interviewing, photographing etc. Different countries have different laws on who is a child. Names of minors/children implicated in crimes must not be disclosed except in extra-ordinary situations. However journalism ethics

on reporting children sometimes are dicey issue in complex situations where the child is a perpetrator of crime. Another issue discussed related to the use of children in political advertisements. It was pointed out that issue depended on the message that the child is being used to project and whether their parents have been consulted prior to the shooting of the advert. Even children of corrupt politicians are still protected at law. Journalists have no right to invade their privacy because of the wrong-doings of their parents. At law all children regardless the status of their guardians are innocent.

Another issue relates to reporting on HIV and Aids and People living with HIV and Aids (PLWHAs). It was noted that some reportage promotes stigmatisation against PLWHAs and perpetuates discriminatory practices. It was highlighted that journalists must desist from perpetrating 'victimhood' stereotypes. The issue of covering faces of photographed people in the media was described as equally unethical in so far at it can allow people to identify the person by association. The issue of LGBTI communities also came up 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 a group of people for ridicule, stigmatisation, and discrimination.

Franz Kruger (2005) has discussed these in-depth in the context of South Africa. He identifies the following ethical norms:

1) Truthtelling:

In some senses 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

This means keeping a distance from the various players, in order to be able to report honestly. This includes governments, even (perhaps particularly) in countries where it owns or dominates broadcasting and other media.

3) Minimise harm

The media can cause significant harm. Established ethics call for harm to be minimised – not avoided completely, since some kinds are unavoidable or even justifiable. A corrupt official may be harmed by the exposure of his or her misdeeds, for instance, but this is far outweighed by the broader public benefit.

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 <u>reporting on people's status</u>. Their story, the way their family deals with the situation, medical details, photographs - all of this belongs to their private sphere, over which they have control. The issue has a particular slant where, as is so often the case, journalists are dealing with <u>people who are poor and disadvantaged.</u> They need to take particular care not to bulldoze people, pushing them into doing something they may not really want to do. <u>public interest can trump the right to privacy, if there is a strong public interest</u>. This is recognised in various codes.

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 respectfully but openly.
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 to account in their handling of the pandemic.
6) Independence means keeping all interest groups - government, 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 fuelling 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 like 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 the

public interest is strong and clear can somebody's HIV status be reported against their wishes. Any undertakings given must be kept.

Dangerous misconceptions should be debunked, and any claims of cures or treatments should be reported with due scepticism.

Interface between law and ethics

It was suggested that often times, law and ethics cross each other's path. The example 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 militate against 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 the ethics no matter where they are working. It can be 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; do not have their own handbooks, and their codes lack sanctioning power.

It was noted that a profession exists for the public. In fact their legitimacy is derived from society in which they practice. Journalism is not on the same wave length as accounting and doctors in terms of the professional barometer. Journalists were described as 'employees' of media owners as opposed to the self-legitimating claim of professionals. In Africa, for instance journalism was described as not fully professionalised. This lack of professionalism was identified as hampering the mainstreaming of ethical/responsible journalism. The question was: how do you get journalists to account to their own codes of ethics? Voluntary adherence has been shown to be ineffective. Another question was: how does the public make journalists account? Letters to the editors and complaints to the media ombudsperson were seen as ineffective again. Press councils as systems of media accountability remain weak. Overall, it was noted that different media accountability systems have loopholes related to enforcement and monitoring.

Model Course outline 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 are mutually reinforcing. However it was pointed out that even in authoritarian political systems, the media ought to be ethical for the sake of the public not authorities.

NB: It was noted that different people take different theoretical approaches to make ethical choices. One can base his/her choice on contractualism while the other deploys the consequentialist moral philosophy. The two journalists are bound to arrive at different ethical decisions and choices.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course alerts the student to ethical issues which arise in the media and which would serve to have a bearing on decision-making with regard to media content. It also provides examples of journalistic Codes of Conduct which emphasise professional behaviour and standards within the journalistic profession.

COURSE OBJECTIVE

Intended Learning outcomes (ILOs)

Upon completion of the 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 READING:

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. It was noted that 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 sceptical of a self-policing 'fourth and fifth estate'. The best option is co-regulation, which is a recent phenomenon. It is prevalent in Western societies. However, co-regulation relies on voluntary adherence which again is a non-starter in some democratic jurisdictions. Truthtelling is at the heart of our function as journalists, and lays the basis for all our ethics.

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