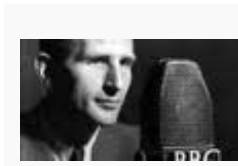


Kevin Marsh: Ethical Journalism (Polis Summer School – guest blog)

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This guest blog was written by Polis Summer School student Karuna Kumar



Not Kevin Marsh

At a time when the News of the World's unscrupulous journalistic ethics are hitting the headlines across the globe it is difficult to stand on the other side of the table and reinstate faith in the moral ideologies of British Journalism. One man, ventured out to do just that and with much confidence and pride. Kevin Marsh, Editor of the BBC College of journalism stood before a class of around 40 students at the LSE Summer School and shared his experiences at the BBC – an organisation that stands as an inspiration for journalists around the world for the ethics and qualitative reporting it supports.

Marsh joined the BBC as early as 1978 and has worked on some of the most legendary shows in British journalism. Starting from The World This Weekend, The World at One to numerous other shows for Radio 4, he has won numerous Sony Awards. He became the Editor of the BBC College of Journalism in January 2007.

Marsh stepped back into the 17th century tracking the beginnings of the practice of journalism. He introduced the concepts of narrative, timeliness and salience and in the same context lends the perspective of philosophers who debated over aspects of truth and verification.

Marsh then made a reference to Areopagitica – a speech by John Milton for the liberty of unlicensed printing made to the Parliament of England pointing out to Britain's effort to further push its agenda of building the culture of the free press. Written to oppose licensing and censorship, Areopagitica is regarded as one of most eloquent speeches delivered to protect the freedom of the press.

Introducing John Stuart Mill, a British philosopher and civil servant, Marsh spoke of some of the stalwarts who stood against unlimited state control in the 18th century; thereby perusing the cause of journalism. "Two traditions blended in hundreds of publications – truth and advocacy", says Marsh, introducing the concept of bundling in the British press. He adds, "Soon, the concept of bundling emerged that saw the newspaper as a bundle of information in addition to classified and display advertising". Then sets in yellow journalism. With the turn of the 19th/20th century, the tradition of 'cheap lurid fiction' with lavish use of pictures, dramatic headlines and misleading interviews brought in the tradition of yellow journalism. Soon, circulation battles ensued. Marsh said,

"Circulation battles between Joseph Pulitzer's New York World and William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal emerged. The battle peaked from 1895 to about 1898, and historical usage often refers specifically to this period".

Marsh cited Edward Bernays and Walter Lippman in the debate over the media and the public. Contrary to the ethics of Lippmann who focussed on reconciling the tensions between liberty and democracy in a complex and modern world, Bernays used psychoanalytical ideas of Sigmund Freud to suggest how the media manipulates public opinion.

Finally, Marsh argued the case for the BBC, emphasizing the aspect of the public purpose of journalism. "Truth and Accuracy, Impartiality, Independence, public interest and accountability" – stand as the founding principles of journalism at the BBC", Marsh said.

He reinforced the fact that the BBC continues to religiously follow these principles of journalism. For me the most pertinent aspect of the talk revolved around the existence, the exploration and the persistent fight for the discipline of journalism – especially now journalism is increasingly being referred to as networked journalism.

The concept of networked journalism is the result of the bulging fluid information flows that are taking place today. Marsh describes it as 'journalism's existential crisis'. Networked journalism essentially means opening up the production process of journalism. Under this concept, the journalist assumes the role of the facilitator rather than the gatekeeper of information; who opens the production process of journalism and shares the process with the public and citizen journalists.

Now, whether that enhances the discipline of journalism or jeopardises it – that's a debate for another day.

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