

Truth and the Media

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Introduction

In Kenya recently, tensions, especially between government and the media, have been reflected in events such as the raiding of The Standard Group offices a few months ago - on 1st March 2006, and the resistance of the President’s security detail to permitting journalists to take photos of the President during the recent youth Forum held in Nairobi in September 2006. Events such as these have given rise to the on-going debate in local media regarding the right to freedom of expression or freedom of press as it is also known and the possible self-regulation of media by journalists themselves through a code of Ethics². In this context, I would like to make some reflections on the art of media communication as related to seeking the truth.

What is journalism?

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² See, for example: J. Walubengo, “Bills that will seek to tame the media”, *Daily Nation*, 10th October 2006.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary³ describes the journalist as “one whose business it is to edit, or write for a journal, especially a newspaper”. From there we can affirm that journalism is the professional activity of those who work in newspaper publishing. However, I think we would all agree that nowadays, journalism is understood in broader terms, to refer to the art of communicating, transmitting facts, events, information, opinions and so on to the general public, using any of the wide variety of means for communication that exist in our society today. The role of the journalist is, therefore, to inform, to report about what is going on in the local and international environment to the people who make up our society. Ultimately, those who are at the receiving end of the journalist’s work trust and hope that the truth is being made known to them. This should bring media operators to ask themselves, “can the public believe all that I communicate to them”? In other words, is there a genuine concern to transmit the truth? Am I genuinely interested in making the truth known?

What is the truth?

At this point we may well be asking ourselves: what is the truth? It is the eternal question which thinkers down through the ages have asked themselves; and not only thinkers. Pontius Pilate too asked “what is the truth” but, as someone else pointed out “staid not to hear the answer”. Let us not do likewise, turning aside and avoiding the question. What is truth? Thomas Aquinas would say that it is the “agreement of the intellect with the thing”⁴ (of the mind with reality). In other words, we can say that truth is the way things actually are in reality. The Concise Oxford Dictionary agrees substantially with this synthesis as we see that it describes truth as “the state of being true or accurate or honest or sincere or loyal or accurately shaped or adjusted”. When something is the way it ought to be according to its nature, we can say that it is true. When something is known by the mind as it is in reality, then that mind knows the truth. How does this relate to the field of media? Precisely, the consumer, that is, the TV watcher, the radio listener, the newspaper

³ The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 7th edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 542.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 1.

reader, the internet surfer, expects and wants the journalist to transmit the truth about what has happened or is happening in our society.

Why seek the truth?

But, the journalist may say, it is not always easy to find out the truth; it is time consuming; it is difficult and we need to meet deadlines and have something to say or publish the following day. We need stories that will make the newspaper, the TV or Radio Station sell, and thus bring in profits for all concerned in the venture. This brings us back, once again, to the age-old debate about the bottom line: profits vs. ethics. To which should precedence be given? In this context, all those involved in the media sector may well ask: “why should we seek the truth in our work”? In reply we may say that the customer is actually looking for the truth and this is shown in the fact that he or she tends to believe all that is found in the media reports. As they cannot possibly ascertain everything that happens personally, they need and want to be informed by trustworthy and truthful professionals. The journalist’s responsibility to seek and to transmit the truth, then, goes back at least to a certain extent, to the *product* that the consumer is looking for and to which he has a certain right: the truth.

Who reports to whom?

More importantly, we may also look at who is doing the reporting and who will receive the final results tomorrow morning at the breakfast table or in the office. In both cases, it is a human being, a person. And who or what is a person? The human person is “an individual substance of a rational nature” according to Boethius⁵. The human person is an individual being, who, once conceived, exists in and by himself, without needing someone or something else to make him exist. He or she is a whole and undivided thing in itself and exists separately from other things, such as a car, a computer or a dog. And

⁵ Boethius, *De duabus naturis*, ch. 3, PL 64, 1343.

what makes a person be a person and not a car or a computer or a dog? Basically, being a person is due to the fact that we are rational beings; that is, we are capable of self-conscious, reflective and abstract thought; we are capable of knowing, thinking, loving, wanting. In fact, each person is always doing one or other of these processes as long as he or she is alive and awake: thinking about their work or family; deciding what to eat for dinner; choosing which means of transport to use.

Why are we capable of carrying out these activities? Basically, it is due to the way we have been made: the human person is made up of body and soul. We can easily ascertain that we have a body when we get burnt by the hot water in a tap or we get wet due to the rains and so develop a cold. How do we know we have a soul or a spiritual principle? We can discover this fact by observing that we are constantly carrying out non-material activities: at present you are, I hope, listening to this speech, and trying to understand the concepts. You are using your brain to do so but that brain is also producing ideas which express what you have understood, on the one hand, and which, at the same time, cannot be touched or seen, picked up and put in a drawer for safe keeping. Perhaps you are concerned about your youngest daughter whom you brought to school this morning although she was sick and, because you love her (note once again that you cannot put your finger on that love), you will ring the school in one of the breaks to find out how she is getting on. These are just some practical examples that help us to identify spiritual activity in ourselves, which has its source in the human soul, the spiritual principle in man.

So we can say that the human person is an amazing unity of matter and spirit, of body and soul. Although at times it may seem so, we are not just a body, which can feel. We are a whole human being, a person, who sees through the eyes, hears with the ears, which enters into contact with the world around us. Through the body the human soul makes this contact with the material world and so the person is capable of communicating with this world, especially with other people, often simply through a look, a word, a smile, a tear. Often journalists make use of such expressions or gestures to transmit a non-verbal message, but still a message with a meaning.

The Media and human dignity

The journalists who communicate and the clients, people, who receive these communications, are persons who have a special dignity. That dignity ultimately lies in our nature itself: we are human beings made of body and soul. Thanks to this way of being, and in particular, thanks to our spiritual soul, we are capable of carrying out certain typically human activities, these are the acts of knowing and loving, which we have already mentioned. These activities have their roots in the human intellect and the will, which are faculties of the spiritual soul. But what are these activities meant for? Why do we have an intellect that is capable of knowing? Why do we have a will that can love, want and choose freely? What purpose do these faculties have? What role do they play in human life?

Basically, the human intellect makes us capable of knowing, but not just any type of knowing; thanks to the intellect we can know the truth. And as we have seen, the truth is the way things are in reality. So, due to the intellect, we can know the truth about the world and people that surround us every day. “All human beings desire to know,” said Aristotle⁶. And, as John Paul II explained, “Everyday life shows how concerned each of us is to discover for ourselves, beyond mere opinions, how things really are. Within visible creation, man is the only creature who not only is capable of knowing but who knows that he knows, and is therefore interested in the real truth of what he perceives”⁷. We can and want to know the truth about people, situations, events, etc. In this context we can understand that the journalist, as a professional communicator about what is going on in the world, has a special responsibility regarding the truth; the journalist needs to foster in himself or herself, the natural desire to know the truth so that, in turn, that truth

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 1.

⁷ John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, n. 25.

can be faithfully transmitted to the other members of our society. The truly professional journalist needs to be a lover of the truth, not just in theory, but in practice! In this way, the client, and society itself will be better served.

“People cannot be genuinely indifferent to the question of whether what they know is true or not. If they discover that it is false, they reject it; but if they can establish its truth, they feel themselves rewarded. It is this that Saint Augustine teaches when he writes: ‘I have met many who wanted to deceive, but none who wanted to be deceived’ (*Confessions*, X, 23, 33)”⁸. Society relies on its media operators to seek the truth relentlessly and to transmit it as it is in the most prudent and opportune manner that is, respecting the human dignity of the persons who may be involved. The journalist’s effort to actually do this shows his love and respect for the truth; such an attitude manifests the awareness the media operator has of his own dignity and that of the consumer, as people who are capable of, made for and who need the truth.

The other characteristic capacity of the human person is to love, want, tend towards and desire those things, events, people, etc., whom we perceive (know) to be good. By our nature we long for what is good; if we desire anything it is because we see some goodness in it, even if it is something as material as enjoying the warmth of the sun on our face or relishing a hot cup of tea on a cold day. From there, our longing for goodness extends to things of higher value and greater perfection such as knowing how to sing or to play a musical instrument; being able to speak another language, or even to miss a loved one when they are away. We are naturally inclined towards good things, and hence we need to come in contact with real good things in order to further develop that love for what is good. Here again the journalist has an important role to play. Perhaps at times, the media people seek macabre, strange, violent stories to report on as they think that this is what “sells”, this is what people “want”⁹. But the journalist’s understanding of human

⁸ Idem.

⁹ An emerging trend especially on TV is to pass satire for news. See, for example, “Are journalists sacrificing truth at the altar of fact?” by Kodi Barth at http://www.kodibarth.com/downloads_standard/Commentaries%20%20Are%20journalists%20sacrificing%20truth%20at%20the%20altar.htm. Many also feel that Kenyan political reporting is lacking in substance. In her opinion piece in *The East African* issue of October 16-22 2006, Muthoni Wanyeki wrote

nature and his sense of social responsibility can also bring him or her to realize, that what the human being naturally *needs*, and therefore wants, are role models: stories about people, events, things that are good and which contribute to improving the overall well-being of everyone in society because they are edifying.

In this context we can mention how the *Daily Nation* is endeavouring to offer more information about “good” news; things which perhaps unexpectedly, people have done well. We can cite the example of 12-year-old Hannah Wanjiru who found a Sh1, 000 note and handed it to her teacher although she was badly off herself¹⁰. This story gave rise to a number of articles, letters and comments in the opinion columns of the newspaper, which further highlighted the happening and have surely made people at least sit up and think about what they would have done in a similar situation. We may also add that the Nation Media Group has also done further marketing for itself by making a donation of foodstuffs to Hannah and her family... At least, the group has also given other people this same idea too! Independently of the “good publicity” it has given itself, by reporting on these type of stories the *Daily Nation*, along with all other forms of media communication can contribute to improving the moral fibre of our society by opening up horizons regarding the good that is being done and that could be done by individuals and intermediate organizations in our community. In this way, the media can appeal to people’s natural desire for what is good and raise our interests and concerns to a higher and nobler level¹¹.

Journalists, then, have the great responsibility of respecting human nature in their professional activity; this means facilitating and fostering the human being’s natural inclination to know the truth and to love and want that which is good. They also have the duty to do justice to the truth by finding out and reporting on what really occurs in our

“our daily news coverage could perhaps move on from the glorified gossip that masquerades as political reporting (who was at what rally, with whom and castigating whom) and report on more interesting, relevant and useful things” at <http://www.nationmedia.com/estafrican/16102006/Opinion/Opinion5.htm>

¹⁰ See “NMG donates food to needy girl’s family”, in *Daily Nation*, 15th August 2006.

¹¹ See, for example: “Mitumba dealer wins Jubilee’s first Good Samaritan award”, in *Daily Nation*, 13th September 2006.

world. In this way their reporting can be a real service to society and to each and every human being, as well as being a truly professional activity.

Professionalism and Codes of Ethics

The freedom of expression, which media operators everywhere long for and defend, should necessarily bring with it a sense of responsibility. Being free to do research and report means that we are also answerable for that reporting, because as we are doing it freely, we know what we are doing and why. If journalists are answerable for their reporting, there needs to be some sort of reference point against which they can judge the goodness or badness of their professional activity. This brings us to the issue of Codes of Ethics and self-regulating mechanisms for media workers. In actual fact, around the world there is a growing tendency among journalists to combine professional skill and technique with high standards of ethical behaviour in their work. A search on Internet for material on Ethics and Journalism produced around 759,300 results which include references to codes of ethics for journalists, case-studies on Ethics and journalism, initiatives such as the Project for Excellence in Journalism, and the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, among many others. The following themes are considered to be common to most codes of journalistic standards and ethics¹².

Objectivity

There ought to be unequivocal separation between news and opinion. Are our in-house editorials and opinion pieces clearly separated from news pieces? Is there a distinction between our news reporters and opinion staff? The Code of Ethics of the Kenyan Union of Journalists states that “Journalists shall distinguish clearly in their reports between comment, conjecture and fact. They shall write in such a manner that the reader is able to distinguish among comment, conjecture and fact”¹³. But does this actually happen in our media? Above all, are both parties aware of the need to transmit the truth? Are both really committed to this task?

¹² See, for example: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalism_ethics_and_standards; viewed on 05-10-06.

¹³ <http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=8325&LID=1>.

Can we say, for example, that there is unequivocal separation between advertisements and news in our media? On the nine o' clock news every evening, advertisements and news items are intertwined in such a way that often it can be difficult to distinguish the difference between them. Are all our advertisements clearly identifiable as such?

The reporter must avoid conflicts of interest, incentives to report a story with a given slant. This includes not taking bribes and not reporting on stories that affect the reporter's personal, economic or political interests. The Codes of Ethics of the Kenyan Union of Journalists and of the Media Industry Steering Committee both make references to these issues. The KUJ code states that: “(1) Journalists and their employers shall conduct themselves in a manner that protects them from real or apparent conflicts of interest. (2) Such conflicts of interest may arise through accepting gifts, bribes, favors, free travel, special treatment or any other form of inducement or privilege”¹⁴. Are these guidelines actually followed by our journalists?

Can we say that competing points of view are balanced and fairly characterized in our media? Are persons who are the subject of adverse news stories allowed a reasonable opportunity to respond to the adverse information before the story is published or broadcast?

Sources

Journalists should avoid using anonymous sources when possible: “Unnamed sources should not be used unless the pursuit of the truth will best be served by not naming the source who must be known by the editor and reporter. When material is used in a report from sources other than the reporter' s, these sources should be indicated in the story”¹⁵. The attribution of statements made by individuals or other news media should be accurate. Pictures, sound, and quotations must not be presented in a misleading context

¹⁴ Idem. See also the Code of Ethics of the Media Industry Steering Committee: “When money is paid for information, serious questions can be raised about the credibility of that information and the motives of the buyer and the seller. Therefore, in principle, journalists should avoid paying for information unless public interest is involved. In the same context, journalists should not receive any money as an incentive to publish any information”.

¹⁵ Code of Ethics of the Media Industry Steering Committee at <http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=158590&LID=1>; viewed on 05-10-06.

(or lack thereof). Simulations, reenactments, alterations, and artistic imaginings must be clearly labeled as such, if not avoided entirely¹⁶. In particular, plagiarism is strongly stigmatized. “a) Using someone else's work without attribution - whether deliberately or thoughtlessly - is a serious ethical breach. However, borrowing ideas from elsewhere is considered fair journalistic practice. b) Words directly quoted from sources other than the writer's own reporting should be attributed. In general, when other work is used as the source for stylistic inspiration the final result must be clearly different from the original work of the reporter”¹⁷.

Accuracy and standards for factual reporting

Reporters are expected to be as accurate as possible given the time allotted to story preparation and the space available. Practical suggestions to ensure such accuracy include the following: a) the effort to seek reliable sources; b) Events with a single eyewitness are reported with attribution; c) events with two or more independent eyewitnesses may be reported as fact; d) controversial facts are reported with attribution; e) independent fact-checking by another employee of the publisher is desirable. Should errors occur, corrections should be published when these errors are discovered.

Of particular importance is the issue of reporting on defendants who are on trial. Such persons should be referred to only as having "allegedly" committed crimes, until conviction, when their crimes are generally reported as fact (unless, that is, there is serious controversy about wrongful conviction). That is, people should not be considered guilty until proved innocent, as sometimes occurs in our media when such persons are actually named and pictures shown of them while still on trial.

Slander and libel considerations

¹⁶ As cameras are not allowed in court, newspapers and TV stations use artists' impressions of the court proceedings to give visual presentation. Recently, NTV simulated voices in court when reporting on the proceedings of Delamare's kin murder case. Did they include a disclaimer? During the Michael Jackson child molestation trial, Sky News dramatised the proceedings but issued a disclaimer saying that they were showing a dramatised version.

¹⁷ Idem.

Reporting the truth is never considered to be libel, but this means that accuracy and attribution are very important so what is reported really is the truth. Private persons have privacy rights that must be balanced against the public interest in reporting information about them. “(1) Intrusion and inquiries into an individual's private life without the person's consent is prohibited unless overriding public interest exists. (2) Matters concerning a person's home, family, religion, ethnicity, race, clan, sexuality, political affiliation, personal life and private affairs are covered by the concept of privacy, except where this impinges upon the public interest”¹⁸.

Harm limitation principle

During the normal course of an assignment a reporter might go about gathering facts and details, conducting interviews, doing research, background checks, taking photos, video taping, recording sound. Should he or she report everything learned? If so, how should this be done? The principle of limitation of harm means that some weight needs to be given to the negative consequences of full disclosure, creating a practical and ethical dilemma. Both the Media Industry Steering Committee Code of Ethics and that of the Kenyan Union of Journalists lists a number of situations in which it may be necessary to limit the information provided: protection of children; victims of sex crimes; innocent relatives and friends; acts of violence; intrusion into tragedy and grief.

Regarding possible obscenity and the need for taste and tone in reporting, the Media Industry Steering Committee indicates that: “In general, the media should avoid publishing obscene, vulgar, or offensive material unless such material contains a news value which is necessary in the public interest. In the same vein, publication of photographs showing mutilated bodies, bloody incidents, and abhorrent scenes should be avoided unless the publication of such photographs will serve the public interest. Television stations must exercise great care and responsibility when presenting

¹⁸ <http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=8325&LID=1>.

programmes where children are likely to be part of the audience”¹⁹. We may well wonder if this norm is being followed by TV stations when reporting on such incidents...

Journalists will often have to face genuine ethical dilemmas when deciding what to report, and how much information to give. In general, based on our earlier considerations regarding the human person, we can say that the media worker should aim at ensuring respect for every human being’s dignity, intimacy and privacy when taking such decisions. It is better to err on the side of extra special respect for the human person rather than excessive disclosure of his or her intimacy.

A model for the Kenyan media

As we mentioned at the start, freedom of press is currently an issue in Kenya where journalists are trying to cope with and adapt to a new political environment, which grants, within certain limits, greater freedom of expression than previous regimes. This has created the need to know “how far one can go”, so to speak, when informing the public on events, people, etc, both at home and abroad. In the Preamble to its Code of Ethics, the Society of Professional Journalists, a worldwide organization which is widely accepted, highlights the duty of journalists to seek the truth, and to be conscientious, thorough and honest in their dealings. The underlying principle of this Society could be useful for our local media industry: “Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist’s credibility”²⁰. Evidently, journalists wish to be believed and very often are believed in to a great extent. This further emphasizes the responsibility involved in this type of professional activity and is a stimulus to the individual journalist in seeking personal integrity, truthfulness and respect for human dignity as we have discussed earlier on.

As we have seen, our local Codes of Ethics for journalists contain guidelines that are on a par with international principles in this field. However, we still need to improve in the implementation of such norms. At the same time, the existence of various Codes of

¹⁹ <http://www.ijnet.org/Director.aspx?P=Ethics&ID=158590&LID=1>

²⁰ <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp?>

Ethics for the industry can be a source of confusion and conflict. To resolve these issues, I would suggest the following:

1. Our local media operators need to be more aware that these guidelines are not just a list of “dos and don’ts”; rather, they reflect deeper ethical issues that ultimately go back to the dignity and value of each and every human being. In this context, it could help our journalists if the basic points in our Codes of Ethics were regrouped under more ethical titles, in order to maintain the awareness that these are important matters which touch on the dignity of the human person as such. The Code of the Society of Professional Journalists could serve as a model in this respect in that it focuses on four main points as follows:

- a) Seeking the truth and reporting it: journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information;
- b) Minimize harm: ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving respect;
- c) Act independently: journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know;
- d) Be accountable: journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

2. It is commonly felt that our local media workers do not have effective means of self-regulation. As a result, the government is stepping in through the publication of bills such as the Media Council Bill (2006) and the Information and Communication Bill (2006), to which journalists have objected. In order to avoid this kind of government intervention, the media sector needs to come up with specific and clear mechanisms for effective self-regulation. This may be facilitated by the creation of one professional association to which all media operators belong and from which they receive their accreditation in order to be able to actually work in the field. This body could create one single Code of Ethics approved by all the members, and also be responsible for applying the agreed methods of self-regulation and chastisement when the norms of this code are violated.

In summary, here in Kenya as anywhere else, the journalist needs to seek the truth honestly in order to respect the dignity of the people about whom and to whom he reports, as well as representing facts and events as they really occurred. This is a challenge for any media operator, which may be facilitated by the establishment in our country of one clear Code of Ethics for journalists, along with a single professional body to which they may belong and through which they may also be held answerable for their professional activity. I would encourage our journalists to persevere in their present endeavour to lay down guidelines for their work so that they may take up the challenge of the truth in a more effective manner and better contribute to the overall well being of our society.