

Ethics in the News: facing up to rights and wrongs

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Responsible, ethical Journalism is a vital part of the democratic process and the opportunity that free elections provide for ordinary people to choose their leaders and to help them make their life choices.

It is the freedom of the media that underpins the freedom and rights of the citizen; without a free media, able to hold leaders to account and inform the public, there can be no guarantee of upholding human rights, personal freedoms or democracy.

I won't bore you with a lengthy rationale for this – I think I can safely assume that all those here are fairly clear about the importance of a free media and the reasons for it, but I do want to talk about some of the impediments to a free press and some of the complex issues that support those impediments, some self-inflicted, that can prevent even the best intentioned journalist from carrying out this duty of reporting responsibly, ethically and fairly through a free media in the public interest.

There are some key issues in news reporting that have a huge impact on how well this is done and so how useful that news is to its consumers. Religious, political, social and cultural issues have all had their part to play in deciding what news to publish and how that news is presented and these interact with professional ethics in editorial decision making. These professional issues have always driven the journalistic ethical debate alongside the cultural frame, but now they are joined by new challenges that make the job even more difficult. Let me list some of the issues that I wish to bring together as particular challenges. For decades, most journalists have worked to a code of practice whether this has been drawn up by their union or professional association, their employer, a regulator or news council. Codes of practice around the world have very similar aims: to uphold free expression and bring fair and accurate journalism to readers, listeners and viewers. These codes always have clauses about accuracy or maybe truth, some talk about fairness, most have clauses about privacy, harassment, and intrusion. Discrimination and concerns about reporting crime and justice also appear in many of these codes. Code clauses can largely be classified as either protecting the rights of individuals or the public or they can be professional ethical matters concerning our behaviour as journalists in how we gather the news, choose it for publication or broadcast and how we actually present the news.

Accuracy or how we present the truth of a story is at the centre of what we do, although the debate about whether we are truth seekers or merely reporters of facts rages on. Let me make it clear that I believe we have a duty to go beyond simply reporting facts. We have an obligation to attempt, at least, to go beyond reporting

what we are told and find out what is really happening. Merely parroting some politician's propaganda is not sufficient. I am saying we should seek truth, but without any real expectation of finding it but at least finding sufficient for our readers to be able to put some trust in our work.

Those of you who followed British politics and the Brexit debate will know of the claim made by those who campaigned to leave the EU that £350m a week would return to Britain on leaving to be spent on our National Health Service. The figure given – painted down the side of the Brexit battle bus – was factually wrong, but more importantly (and a question that most media missed) there was never any real intention to use that money for the National Health Service. Campaigners later claimed (after the referendum) that they simply meant it could be used for that. Even more disturbing, perhaps, we have seen Donald Trump in the USA making claims throughout his election campaign and since becoming president that are simply not true – many indeed are entirely fantastical - yet he then accuses the media that exposes these as “fake news”. Not only are his original false claims reported, but also his claims that those who expose his claims as false are lying.

There are, of course, some serious impediments to the process of seeking truth rather than relaying claims. Limited access to information, the importance of reporting authoritative sources, and the need for speedy onward transmission have always been serious limitations to the good (that is ethical) reporter. These days these tasks are made even more difficult by 24-hour news cycles, the internet and social media that can turn anyone into a “reporter” whether or not they know anything about the story and authorities, trained to consider the media and with the support of communication specialists, who often have little regard for facts and the truth when it comes to advancing their political agenda.

The media is now battling against social media for the trust of the public. The problem is that social media works on the basis of people forming links with friends, colleagues and those of like opinions and mindset. You read things on Twitter or Facebook that are sent to you by friends who you trust. You don't think to check whether that is wrong; you assume your friend would have already done that before sending it as that is the traditional style of communication: find the news, check it and then transmit it. Social media (and I wrote a paper about this as early as the nineties about email rumour transmission) involves *reading* the news, assuming it has been checked before sending and disregarding the possibility that it has been passed on simply because it is fun, supportive of your viewpoint, simply interesting or possibly true and then sending it on to your friends as something that might interest them without checking it yourself.

These kinds of rumour machines have worked since time immemorial but in the past have been limited because of the method of transmission (mouth to ear), which is slow and the blocks that could be put in place by knowledge or trusted sources.

Jonathan Swift, the political satirist, identified this issue in 1710: “Besides, as the vilest Writer has his Readers, so the greatest Liar has his Believers; and it often happens, that if a Lie be believ’d only for an Hour, it has done its Work, and there is no farther occasion for it. **Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it;** so that when Men come to be undeceiv’d, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect”. Many others since have made the same observation; it has always been tough combatting with the truth what people want to believe. Now with social media and constant propaganda assaults from politicians, campaigners and corporations whether through social media or advertising it is even more difficult.

Another factor that makes reporting the truth even more difficult is the drive for greater profits. Newspapers in particular have been feeling the draft of economic trouble but traditional broadcasters have also found that their advertising revenues have been gradually moving online. Major news providers have cut staff as they seek to keep profits high. Bureaux close, staff are made redundant; stories that would have had seven or eight reporters working on them are now covered by one person whilst news that would have been covered by a single reporter is now picked up from social media, a press release or not covered at all. The pressure is on reporters from proprietors and editors to go for the easy stories, the ones that will draw consumers, not the ones that people need to know about. This can be an especially difficult problem for new journalists starting their careers. Pressures to “bend the rules”, invade privacy, embroider stories are tougher to combat when you are inexperienced and only recently starting your career. Strong support from more experienced reporters who are prepared to stand up for ethics is required. We are bombarded with “fake news”: hoaxes, sent to us for fun, to show us up and make people laugh. Advertising tricked up as genuine news: a survey allegedly carried out by a major toothpaste manufacturer showing that people with gleaming white clean teeth are twice as likely to attract the perfect mate. Rumours put about by those who hope to make money or benefit in some other way and of course fabrications and propaganda from politicians, the police, the armed forces, campaigners or corporations who hope to persuade us of their viewpoint despite the facts, or at least muddy the water. In the UK a major disaster at the Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield killed 96 people. Police told the Sun newspaper that it was the fault of Liverpool fans who had “behaved appallingly”. It took almost thirty years for the families of the dead to get justice and for an inquiry to show that the police had lied, altered statements and issued false press releases. Seven former police officers now face charges. The Sun, which printed the lies on the front page under the heading “The Truth” is still reviled in Liverpool.

Privacy is another area of concern with media, especially newspapers and magazines, relying more and more on stories about celebrities to make sales rather than deal with the more difficult hard news. There is enormous pressure on some journalists to find about the personal lives of politicians and celebrities. This is made

ethically easier for many by the link up between press agents and some publications where stories about the celebrity are fabricated with their knowledge to provide a strong, essentially fictional, story about that celebrity that will strengthen their profile. Most celebrities now have a public persona that is fictional; a character that has been invented. Of course this plays into the hands of some publications who can always rip away the mask as a last resort for a good story. Again many reporters face strong pressure from their proprietors and editors to dig out the gossip and again, particularly young and inexperienced reporters can be overwhelmed by the pressure and feel this is the way things are and they can't change them. Often, feeling this is what is expected of them they often go too far in their desire to please the editor. More experienced reporters need to do more to show that we can challenge these editorial choices and do our best to provide truthful news.

Of course in a country where there is no or very little pretence of having a free media much of the above is meaningless. Journalists have little choice about what to publish and are well aware of the boundaries they face. However, even here we need to be brave enough to push the boundaries, not to stop well short of what we believe is expected of us.

As journalists we need to battle constantly for a free media using journalists working to the highest ethical and professional standards. If the media and journalism are to survive in a world of social media and repressive forces we need to build the trust of our readers and viewers. We won't always get it right, but we should have tried at least.

Even repressive regimes and politicians may come to realise that an ethical, trusted media no matter critical it is of them is better than a wild untruthful social media driven by conspiracists, radicals and ambitious politicians who will stoop to any method to get power. We need to fight to make the media relevant and we need to fight to make it free and keep it free.

Short Biography

Chris Frost is emeritus professor of Journalism at Liverpool John Moores University where he was head of department until recently. He has been a journalist, editor and journalism educator for more than 40 years.

He is member of the National Executive Committee of the National Union of Journalists and chair of the union's Ethics Council. He is a former President of the National Union of Journalists and a former member of the UK Press Council.

He is a former Chair of the Association for Journalism Education, which represents virtually all HE journalism departments in the UK and Ireland and is an executive board member of the Institute of Communication Ethics and co-editor of *Journalism Education*. He sits on the editorial board of several academic journals.

He has written several books including *Journalism Ethics and Regulation* (now in its fourth edition); *Designing for Newspapers and Magazines* (second edition); and *Reporting for Journalists* (second edition).

He has published widely writing book chapters, academic papers and magazine and newspaper articles on journalism ethics, regulation and law. He has spoken at conferences or worked as a consultant in much of Eastern Europe, India, Asia and Africa and is a visiting professor at UiTM in Malaysia.