

# Guest Editorial

Nazeem Howa, deputy editor of The Star, reconsiders the values of journalism

## Six of the best



Getting the facts right is not the same as having the right facts

Journalistic values drive what goes on in newsrooms each day – what issues and events get covered, who journalists interview, how stories are framed and presented. These values come into play every day in our lives as professionals.

The top six are:

- Credibility
- Community connectedness
- Balance
- Accuracy/authenticity
- Leadership
- Judgement

The journalism values system works much like an ecosystem. At first glance, the elements of land, air, water and wildlife seem quite distinct. As the elements interact and function together as a whole, a much more complex and nuanced environment emerges.

We will do our craft no good by practising these values in isolation from each other. We need to look at how we can inter-relate all of them in the day-to-day activities of our journalism.

**Credibility** is driven by how primary stakeholders view what we do over time. Readers judge a medium's credibility by whether journalists:

- demonstrate a deep understanding of the community and are a reliable source of information;
- act as part of the community, not just as passing visitors;
- take responsibility for how their coverage might affect people.

If media and journalists lack credibility, people vote by keeping their hands in their pockets or turning off their sets – and the figures show the results of that silent protest.

Four key values lie at the heart of preserving our credible status with readers. These are: balance, accuracy, leadership and accessibility. These four values play off one another. For example, if a journalist views balance as capturing only two opposite sides when there are actually multiple dimensions to a story, then accuracy suffers and claims of bias may result.

As our country undergoes its massive transformation, we are all under increasing pressure to review our news judgements. Judgement acts as the filter through which the values of balance, accuracy, leadership and accessibility flow.

If the judgement filter is somehow off-target, if the medium does not truly understand what is important to readers, or if “official” voices exclusively drive news coverage, then the medium risks losing its relevance and meaning in people's lives. Credibility is thus undermined.

**Community connectedness:** We must find a way to end the sterile fashion in which we have become accustomed to reporting on the bread-and-butter issues which affect our readers. The era of media being third-party witness to history is over. Instead, we need to locate ourselves firmly within the communities we serve in order to better judge what information is relevant and meaningful to people.

Moving closer to our communities does not necessarily mean we compromise our credibility. However, it does mean we have to be very careful about watching our assumptions.

Preconceived views and assumptions can drive how we approach stories and how news is represented. A particular challenge is that our middle managers – who really run our media – don't necessarily understand the communities we serve.

**Balance:** It's not just both sides, it's all sides. Journalists too often approach balance as covering “both sides” of the story. This often results in an approach which delivers stories of the “he said/she said” variety, much like playing a game of table tennis.

A more appropriate approach recognises that a diversity of viewpoints exists; that there are solutions along with problems; that there is good with the bad.

We should worry less about balance and more about reflecting a sense of fairness and wholeness. We need to move in from the margins and capture the moderate perspectives – points of agreement and places where indecision, uncertainty and indifference exist.

We must look beyond the official institutions and the usual suspects to illuminate what is happening within the communities we serve.

**Accuracy/authenticity:** Getting the basic facts right (such as names, addresses, time and place) is non-negotiable. But getting the facts right is not the same as getting the right facts. Journalists must provide the background, context and perspective required to paint a complete picture for people. The “right facts” means reflecting the tone, language, experiences and emotions of the public – creating a bond with our communities.

We need to generate news coverage that is authentic – not just accurate. Authenticity is something that occurs over time, not just in one story.

Authenticity conveys what people

see, hear and experience living in their communities.

**Leadership:** The mass media exercise leadership when journalists:

- anticipate important issues that the public should consider – shedding light on issues and problems before they reach crisis point;
- play the role of explainer – clarifying what is happening on an issue and dispelling myths that may exist;
- provide news and information that help the public to form reasoned judgements rather than just superficial opinions;
- provide a place where the public can learn about and begin to examine issues in order to find, for itself, common ground for action.

Leadership means we take responsibility for how stories and news coverage might affect the public; that we think twice about stories that unnecessarily strip away people's hope, but also that we don't neglect stories that challenge people to think about important issues.

To earn and maintain the public's trust as a credible source of information, journalists must remain independent of undue influences.

**Judgement:** Making the right call is everyone's job. Judging how journalistic values literally play out daily and over time is becoming more challenging.

Within this context, all members of the newsroom staff – not just editors – must continually exercise judgements. This means adding value to people's lives by selecting, shaping and bringing definition to what is important and interesting, and not merely providing information.

Journalists should provide people with the information they need – context, perspective and meaning – to make their own judgements.

The era of media being third-party witness to history is over