

LEADERSHIP, ETHICS  
AND JOURNALISM

BY JAMES A JOSEPH

Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who was a keen observer of civic life, said almost 200 years ago, "You can't have real newspapers without democracy and you can't have real democracy without newspapers." I am sure that he would extend his observation today to include all forms of media.

As one concerned with leadership and ethics (my primary experience as an academic and a civic activist, as well as teacher and researcher, has been with both these topics), I must begin with the definition of ethics in journalism as "obedience to the unenforceable". This concept, introduced by the British judge, Lord Moulton, includes moral duty, social responsibility, and proper behaviour, but extends beyond them to cover all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself. I spent 14 years running a large membership organisation in Washington who wanted me to tell their story to the public and to protect them from unnecessary government regulation. One of the things I learned especially applicable to journalism is that, while self-regulation is preferable to government regulation, in the absence of visible and viable evidence of self-regulation you invite and increase public demand for government regulation.

Media surveys by organisations like the Pew Centre tell us that the public believes the line between reporting and commentary has become blurred and so has the line between entertainment and news. There is also widespread belief that the news media spends more time serving elites, or attacking elites, than in providing useful information for ordinary citizens. Jim Lehr, a television commentator, has said, "Journalism as practised by some has become something akin to professional wrestling – something to watch rather than believe." Others argue that the contemporary media does a good job of covering the noise, but need to do a better job in covering the silence.

With these comments by some of your colleagues as a backdrop, we return to the question of not simply what is ethics, but how do we apply them. For those of us who see journalism as a profession with noble purpose and committed to responsible practices, the four burning questions are:

**The idea of civic duty**

Does journalism have a responsibility to contribute to citizenship, that is, to help people figure out what kind of role they can play in a democracy beyond voting? Democracy used to mean a system of government in which the people have the power, but it has come to mean in far too many places a system of government where the people have the vote which is not necessarily the same as having the power.

**The idea of civic diplomacy**

Why do many in the public see the practice of journalism as more akin to the attack-dog role that creates confusion, rather than the role of an intermediary whose responsibility it is to provide clarity? I discovered a long time ago that it was neither effective nor responsible to simply yell at public officials I wished to influence or even simply to report the diatribes of others who are yelling. From my earliest days in the civil rights movement, I have always believed in trying to bring civility to confrontation – trying to show respect for the humanity of the adversary even while struggling to change their practice.

**The idea of civic dialogue**

Could it be, as some suggest, that today's press does a better job of holding leaders accountable than in holding citizens

responsible? One advocate of civic journalism argues that if journalists did their job differently, citizens might do their job differently. Others ask: "Are we contributing to conflict or consensus?" Balance is not just presenting opposing viewpoints, but viewpoints that help get at the whole story in ways that enlighten rather than outrage.

**The idea of civic definition**

Does the practice of ethical journalism now require the shaping of a new definition of what is newsworthy? Market forces have changed the definition of news, with both markets and ratings a critical driver of what is covered and even how it is covered. We may also need to stop defining news as conflict; winners versus losers, good versus bad. The dominant framework for narrative has become the sports analogy where we report not on the game but simply the scores.

We come now to the question of leadership in journalism. Is it appropriate to think of journalists as leaders rather than simply intermediaries? In other words, do journalists have a responsibility to lead or simply to reflect the concerns and conversations they hear? Regardless of how you answer that question, one thing is clear. Responsible journalists must go beyond pre-conceived ideas about an issue or listening only to the loudest voices. All of society benefits when you find ways to listen to those who are silent as much as to those who are shouting.

When I think of leadership in journalism, I think of some of the same qualities that are required for effective leadership in other sectors of a democracy. The first of these is emotional intelligence. The journalists who are most sensitive to their social responsibilities are likely to demonstrate self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and social skills. There is no contradiction between the ability to be objective and the capacity to feel another's pain or to feel a need to share another's burden. There is no contradiction between the exercise of self-regulation and the need for some form of social regulation by the profession or the public.

The second requirement for being socially responsible is moral intelligence. There is a lot of talk about ethics in public life, but far too many people use the word to offer judgement on someone else's behaviour rather than to scrutinise their own. We have seen the rise of virtuecrats whose primary interest is in transforming the private virtues of their particular faith tradition into the public values of the nation state. Journalists must be able to distinguish between the deliberate use or misuse of ethics to promote a political agenda and its use to unite a community or call a nation to a common purpose. Civil rights activists in the 1960s understood the distinction between the politics of virtue and the practice of virtue, between the parochialism of dogma and the public requirements of democracy.

Why does moral intelligence matter? The first answer is that most of the great issues of the day are moral issues. A second reason is pragmatic. More and more leaders are finding it in their self-interest to be ethical. At least half of the organisational leaders studied for the book *Value Shift* characterised ethics as risk management. They see values not just as a tool for ensuring fairness and preventing misconduct,

but as a way of avoiding the high-profile missteps of government leaders, the great financial losses experienced by some corporations, and the embarrassment brought to some newspapers because of unethical behaviour.

A third reason is that, while ethics has been used to domesticate and humanise power, we live increasingly in a world where ethics *is* power. Many consumers are now making choices on the basis of what they consider to be responsible behaviour: how the company treats its workforce, its gender and race policies, its impact on the environment. Executive recruiters report that boards of directors and CEOs still want key people who can make the company money, make tough decisions, and fit the management team, but now there is an even stronger interest in ethics, values and goals.

Ethics is also power in the nongovernmental sector, where so many of the organisations that populate the space between the market and the state are being forced to re-examine what it means to be accountable to a public. People now see leaders in civil society as custodians of values as well as resources.

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Ethics is even power in international relations, where world leaders are discovering that, while military power and economic muscle can prevent or inflict pain, it is diplomacy – acts of generosity, moral messages and respect for local cultures – that can best develop the kind of influence most likely to endure.

The third element required is social intelligence, beginning with understanding and respecting the dignity of difference. What most of the public want was best expressed by Howard Thurman, the African American mystic, theologian and poet who was a mentor of Martin Luther King. Thurman was fond of saying “I want to be me without making it difficult for you to be you”. Can you imagine how different our countries would be if more people were able to say the same thing? Can you imagine how different all our communities would be if more Christians were able to say, “I want to be a Christian without making it difficult for a Jew to be a Jew, a Muslim to be a Muslim, a Buddhist to be a Buddhist or a Hindu to be a Hindu”?

This kind of social intelligence enables us to convey

the message that diversity need not divide; that pluralism rightly understood and rightly practised is a benefit and not a burden; and that the fear of difference is a fear of the future.

The fourth quality required is spiritual intelligence. This may seem like an odd quality to emphasise for ethics in journalism, but here I refer to something that cannot be contained within the walls of religion. By spiritual intelligence, I mean a higher consciousness that not only keeps us grounded, but enables us to probe the inner self of the other, not just the intellect where you locate ideas and insights, but the soul of journalism where you find the capacity for civility in confrontation. It enables one to see journalism as something more meaningful than a job description or a series of assignments. Most importantly, it is the ability to maintain respect for the humanity of those whose lives are examined or whose actions are exposed.

Finally, spiritual intelligence promotes a form of civic journalism that maintains the capacity to provide hope even in the midst of tales of tragedy and broken trust. Here I join those who make a distinction between optimism and hope.

Optimism surveys the evidence and determines that there are reasons to believe that things will get better. Hope, on the other hand, looks at the evidence and at the same time sees alternative possibilities and sets out to write about them. We live in an age that psychologists call a time of free-floating anxiety. People are so anxious that they are anxious about the fact that they are anxious. So when I say that we need journalists who provide hope, I am referring to the kind of hope Vaclav Havel had in mind when he wrote, “I am not an optimist because I do not believe that everything ends well. I am not a pessimist because I do not believe that everything ends badly. But I could not accomplish anything if I did not hope within me, for the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.”

When I use the word hope I don’t mean that you lose your objectivity. I simply mean that you seek to identify and write about stories that are good news as well as bad news. So please remember that when you cover those who provide help you also provide hope, and the gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.