

The journalism of SELF PRESERVATION

Keeping jobs and making money

If you ask any practising journalist what role journalists play in society, the most probable answer will be to promote public interest by reliably and accurately informing citizens about the most crucial issues that directly affect their lives.

But I am not sure if the answer would be in the affirmative if you asked the same journalist if that is actually what he or she does because the reality may be quite different from such text book definitions of the role of journalists in society.

By Jacinta Maweu

Regulation
Ethics
Accountability

With journalists and the media increasingly focusing on the bottom line (and profits), and less on public interest, one is left to wonder if there is any room for journalism ethics in the new media model any more.

It is evident that the ways in which traditional media and journalism work have changed with the new business model, but the ethical imperatives of good journalism have remained unchanged. The benchmarks of professional journalism, truth, accuracy, reliability, impartiality, respect for humanity and the promotion of public interest, still remain cardinal principles that make media content credible and useful to the wider audience.

But who adheres to these cardinal principles anymore? When people talk about journalism ethics, what comes to mind are invasions of privacy, corruption, sex in the media and sensationalism in reporting that is likely to cause chaos through public incitement.

That explains why the phone hacking scandal in the UK caused so much public uproar, because it was regarded as a blatant violation of journalism ethics.

But there is an even deeper crisis in journalism ethics that has nothing to do with the hacking scandal, ethnic hate speech, sex in the media or even corruption among journalists. The crisis is a commercial threat on journalism ethics.

My interviews with journalists working for commercial media in Kenya revealed that most of the time, individual journalists experience ethical dilemmas emanating from the desire to fulfill their ideal professional role as journalists, which according to them is the promotion and protection of public interest, and the need to preserve themselves against internal and external commercial threats as they adjust to the realities of the corporate newsroom.

The journalists observed that corporate pressure



Joshua Oates

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from media owners, advertisers and shareholders force them to practise what they called "the journalism of self preservation", because they want to keep their jobs and the owners want to make money.

Most of the journalists I talked to cited the ethical principles of accuracy, fairness, truth, objectivity and public interest as the principles that guide them every day in their work. But most of them also observed that sometimes, it is more practical to violate these principles in order to survive.

It was near unanimous that most of the journalists try to be ethical and professional in their work by observing both the code of conduct and the editorial policy guidelines. But they also observed that there are real challenges and threats that compromise their capacity to fulfill their ideal role as journalists. They lamented that though they are technically free to fulfill their roles as journalists, ownership does influence their freedom because their freedom is limited by commercial interests.

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Media professionals who are brave enough to own up to their deep-seated fears of the economic threats to their very survival will tell you that they are more afraid of commercial threats from the market because, unlike the government, markets subtly vote with their pockets and hence are worse media regulators.

As some of the journalists told me, the media is first and foremost a business and someone owns that business. At the end of the day, the owner wants profit and this has profound implications on how journalists go about their professional roles.

Indeed, the media is a business and decent profits can and should be made from it. But ethical problems arise when owners regard the media as akin to any other industry. The moment media executives and journalists begin talking about their work as if it were just another branch of the business industry among others, branches that only require profitability so that they can maintain their own and their employees' positions, society is in deep trouble.

Listening to media executives, one can tell that profitability has become both the sole means and goal of the media business.

This is a sorry state because the moment journalists and the media in general fail to report on a matter of public interest because it is not in the interests of their industry, a betrayal of the sanctity of journalism occurs.

Such behaviour undermines the media's capacity to authoritatively question the disreputable, self-serving behaviour which they routinely accuse other sectors of indulging in. The interests of the news media as businesses are contrary to the press' traditional role in serving the public. The primary obligation of journalism is truth and its first loyalty should be to the public, not profits.

Good journalism practice must be grounded in journalism ethics to encourage the responsible use of the freedom to publish. Journalism ethics encourage a more professional media that is aware of its social role and its capacity to make or break the society. Journalists have to know to what extent market forces can have their way in the media without compromising public

interest, which is the essence of journalism.

The success of any democracy depends upon the combined efforts of professional journalists, concerned citizens, and responsible media institutions that can balance between public and commercial interest. And without such, citizens only fool themselves when they claim they are informed and self-governing.

So are journalism ethics on trial and is there any chance for survival?

There is no doubt that journalism ethics are on trial in most democratic societies both in the developed and developing world due to the increased bottom-line mentality of senior management and media owners.

But all hope is not lost. With the professional integrity of journalists and the deliberate effort by the media fraternity to practise responsible journalism, journalism ethics can still survive these commercially-turbulent times.

Journalists and the media in general must understand that, if they are to retain their credibility and honour their constitutional protection of free speech, they must operate by some minimum ethical standards. If the media is to hold politicians, public officials and the private sector to a certain standard, the media will have to live by those same standards.

Journalists set the agenda for what readers will be thinking about and discussing with colleagues. Despite these economic threats, journalists should know how to balance the owner's desire for profits without compromising their professional integrity. As some of the journalists I talked to observed, the first obligation of the journalist should be to get their facts right, then wave the code of conduct and the editorial policy guidelines to defend themselves once their seniors and the management come after them.

When the editor or the owner tries to limit a thorough investigation because it is against industry interest, the journalist should know when it is ethical to negotiate to protect public interest. Ethical journalism may be a delicate balancing act amid all these commercial pressures, but as some of them told me, it can be done. The challenge lies in how to fund such journalism in the new commercial media environment.



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