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Communication Ethics In A Changing Asia

By

Max L Snijders
Communication Ethics in a Changing Asia

Address by Max L. Snijders at the Conference on Communications, Convergence and Development, Bangkok, Thailand, June 24, 1994

In an Asian city I ask direction of a person in the street, pointing out where I think I must go.

"Is this the right way to the Buddhist temple?"

The man says yes, it is. But he knows full well it is not. That is a result of an inner clash of two values: his urge to tell the truth on the one hand and his urge not to contradict another person who seems convinced of something. In this case, the value of not contradicting the friendly foreigner wins.

After some time, seeing that I am going the wrong way, I improve on my question and I ask another passer-by: "Which is the right direction to the Buddhist temple?"

Unknowingly, I have created another clash of values in this man's mind. Because he does not know. And rather than telling the truth, he wants to save face. So he points in a certain direction and again I am going the wrong way.

The third person I ask is a convinced muslim. He does not want me to go to a Buddhist temple at all. In his mind there is a clash of the value of letting me behave in accordance with that opinion and, again, telling the truth. And for the third time, truth loses, because another value is regarded as of higher order.

In all three cases, I think, European passers-by would have acted differently; they would have let the truth prevail.

This is, in a nutshell, what communication ethics in an Asian setting is about. But we are talking about communication ethics in a changing Asia and from my point of view I am specifically talking about a form of communication restricted to journalism.
JOURNALISTIC ETHICS IN A CHANGING ASIA

Ethics, in all cases, is the application of moral codes. Moral codes are absolute values: THOU SHALT NOT KILL, NOT STEAL, NOT LUST AFTER ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE.

One of the moral rules in most societies is Thou Shalt Not Lie. But it is not difficult for all of us to think of real-life situations in which it is acceptable to lie. Or even necessary. For instance when it is a matter of life and death. There are even situations in which it is acceptable to kill, although not taking another person's life is a very strong moral prescription everywhere.

For this practical application of the moral codes, we have ethics: rules of conduct which are not as absolute as the moral code, because they take account of actual circumstances.

A workable code of ethics, therefore, boils down to determining an order of importance, of priorities, given to a range of moral rules. And the question is, which rule has, in any given situation to prevail.

Now in order to determine this order of importance, we ought to look into the essentials of the profession for which we are to lay down this code of ethics. For a lawyer they are different from those of the doctor, for a doctor they are different from those of the journalist.

It would be comparatively easy to mention the different elements out of which a code of ethics for journalists ought to consist. But applying these elements in practice, requests a weighing of one against the other. Is the order of importance for the journalist determined by the interest of the state - or of the nation, the development of mankind, by human dignity, or what?

The weight that is given to each of these interests in this part of the world, differs from the weight ascribed to them in other continents.

Face-saving is more important here than elsewhere. At least one country, Indonesia, knows the format of 'mushawara', talking about your differences until at the end you come to a conclusion which is acceptable to all.

Not contradicting one's elders or elderly people in general is in high regard in other countries. In many countries there exists a general feeling that in public utterances one should take account of the impact one's words or deeds can have on the national interest and/or on the development of the national economy.
Although, thus, everyone has the right to make use of these provisions, journalists have made it their profession to do so.

And in order to do this, there is one thing they have to guarantee and that is their trustworthiness, their credibility.

I submit that this credibility is the ethical value that deserves to have the highest priority in the range of values which form a code of conduct in the field of journalistic communication.
How can we bring these specific Asian requirements and values into harmony with standards of journalistic ethics?

In order to do that, we have to delve into essentials of the profession. That is NOT: bringing the news, as is so often assumed and claimed, although it is still the activity by which journalism is best described. I think the essential element of journalism in the present world, also the Asian world, is that every citizen is entitled to know what is happening around him or her.

It is only with that knowledge that a person can function as a complete element of society - at least of a democratic society. It is only with that knowledge that a citizen can vote, that is: make a choice at elections. So, I am not talking about dictatorships, because there can be no fullfledged citizenship in dictatorships, where a person's right to know, to express his opinion and to make choices is curtailed or even totally absent.

Now in how far can we allow - can you allow - the Asian values in this field to differ fundamentally from those in other parts of the world?

I think we should go back to a Declaration which, for good reason, is called a Universal Declaration. I am referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which all members of the United Nations have adhered.

That Declaration says, in Article 19:
"Everyone has the right to freedom of expression;
"("Everyone" - not just journalists, not just people who have a licence, not just people who are admitted as members of a Journalists Union - everyone) 
"... this right includes freedom to hold opinions, without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, and regardless of frontiers"

Although, thus, everyone has the right to make use of these provisions, journalists have made it their profession to do so. And in order to do this, there is one thing they have to guarantee and that is their trustworthiness, their credibility.

I submit that this credibility is the ethical value that deserves to have the highest priority in the range of values which form a code of conduct in the field of journalistic communication.
If other values—whichever they may be—gain precedence over credibility, journalistic communication becomes so unreliable even so perverted that it no longer can fulfill the task which was entrusted to it or which journalists assumed, accepted, promised to carry out.

Only if the citizen can be assured that journalists perform the function to which he, the citizen himself, is also entitled, only then can he entrust the journalist with that highly important function.

Once journalists have created the situation in which they professionally perform this function of supplying other citizens with news and opinion, there are three more reasons why there should be a set of ethical standards.

One is, that the product of journalism has then become practically indispensable. Without the media there is, in a democratic society, insufficient opportunity to receive information. And as, as we have seen, this information is indispensable for the functioning of the citizen in that society, the suppliers of it must be subject to a known set of ethical values.

Second additional reason for the existence of a code of ethics: apart from having become indispensable, in modern society the media can be formidable power. And power, in order not to be misused, ought to be committed to certain rules.

The third additional reason is a negative one: if journalists themselves do not create their own rules of conduct, chances are, that governments or international agencies are bound to try and impose them. The danger that brings with it, will be clear: the freedom to criticize activities of authorities might easily be curtailed, restricted; the possibility to expose corruption or misuse of power might easily become non-existent.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

In order to go into the practical application of ethical rules, it is useful to distinguish three sets of relations between media-performers and their surroundings:

- the relation to the object or the source of information
- the relation to colleagues
- the relation to society as a whole.

Let us look at each of these fields and see whether practice bears out what we so far have remarked about the theoretical concept.
Journalist and object/source

Protection of source
- right to withhold evidence to police
  Declaration of Santiago (2-6 May 1994): "No journalist should be forced to reveal his or her sources of information"

This, of course, does not mean that the journalist is not legally responsible for what he writes, says or pictures.

- Off the record and other forms of confidential information
- Privacy: what is of no importance for public performance ought to be kept out of the media (very different practice in different media and in different countries)

Do we mention names of suspects and victims? Again sizable differences:
- Ethnic origin
  - embargo-rules: applicable to news that does not originate before a certain moment;
  - should be limited in time;
  - only applicable to news that before was not known;
  - no more valid if another medium violates it
- rectifications: letters to the editor incorporation in a follow-up pure rectification (role of court of justice: this is on the borderline between law and ethics)
- withholding disclosure of information for payment

IT ALL MEANS THAT THE SOURCE CAN RELY ON THE JOURNALIST TO WHOM HE ENTRUSTS INFORMATION = CREDIBILITY
But: the more detailed we get, the more it appears that universal rules only apply to the essential elements.

Journalist and his colleagues

. plagiarism
essential changes in colleagues’ work
other economic or political interests of the journalist
(paid or unpaid)
acceptance of gifts and travel

RUSTWORTHINESS IS THE KEYWORD IN THE RELATION BETWEEN JOURNALISTS: BOTH FOR COLLEAGUES WORKING AT THE SAME LEVEL AS FOR THE RELATION BETWEEN SUPERIORS AND CO-WORKERS

The most difficult field:

journalists and society

Fairness in reporting of facts
Separation of facts and opinion
Interest of the state versus the right to know of the public (the Pentagon Papers, Bays of Pigs Invasion, Britain’s D- notes)
Private vs public interest (public figures)
Cooperation with police - under what circumstances
Attention to news that can be harmful to the coherence of society (terrorist, racist or separatist movements)
Influence of the newsprocess on the event (particularly in the case of coverage)
Hear both sides
cloak and dagger journalism
chequebook journalism

Finally, let us ask ourselves where Asian values can still result in a difference from the way journalists in other parts of the world would deal with those rules of conduct.
In other words, where Asians would have problems in straight application of these rules.
Let us, therefore, recall some of the typical Asian values I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture (and I hope you will add some during the discussion):

- respect for elderly people
- the importance of face-saving
- the reluctance to prove another person wrong
- the importance of national coherence and national development
- the reluctance to admit one's own ignorance.

With the exception of this last one, I think it all boils down to bringing in these extra factors into one's weighing of consequences of a certain behaviour.

Very often it will mean a toning-down of the consequences for a certain person or a certain interest.

But hardly can I imagine that it will mean the suppression of the truth, the distortion of facts.

If we talk about 'a changing Asia' we do not only mean the proliferation of industrialisation and wealth; we also mean the development towards more democratic relations. The market-economy which is now even embraced by former communist countries, requests not only people with a rather high level of education. It also requests people who are ready to take a certain responsibility for the work they do, who are able to develop initiatives and not just look submissively at their superiors.

It might be the subject for a complete following seminar, but I submit that democracy not only has to do with the growing urge of people to be master of their own destiny, but also with the necessity of modern industry - and thus the necessity of modern states - to be able to rely on full-fledged citizens. And full-fledged citizens are people who are able to think freely, to collect information freely and to express opinions freely.

In a changing Asia, therefore, where democratic tendencies increase, the responsibility of the journalist must be laid down in rules which become more or less universal.

What rests to be addressed, of course, is the problem of what one should do in a situation where democracy does not exist or is at least incomplete - as is still the case in quite a few countries in this part of the world.
Very often credibility clashes with the small scope of press freedom which journalists possess. And here again, we encounter a weighing of values. The value of economic wellbeing and even physical safety of the individual against the value of self esteem. A journalist in an authoritarian country who does not even try to enlarge the scope of his freedom of expression, cannot and will not experience that important feeling of self esteem.

We cannot demand of journalists to die for their cause. But many journalists - also in this part of the world - have suffered when fighting for the freedom they believe in. We should also realize that a person who is not ready to fight against authoritarian restrictions in this field, better would not become a journalist or not remain one.

But the more must we admire those who have become the heroes of our profession, because they stuck to their code of values even if they had to go to prison for it. I should like to wind up by paying tribute to those Asian journalists who have thus contributed to the right of the modern citizen to know what is going on in his world.