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A Perspective On Newspaper Ethics

By

H'ng Hung Yong
"A Perspective on Newspaper Ethics"

by

HING HUNG YONG

Editor,
The Star,
Kuala Lumpur.
1. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As the only practising newspaper man on the panel, my concerns as a journalist do not differ very much from those of the other three panelists. What is perhaps more characteristic of my profession than of others is the fact that the printed word in the newspaper has a distinct permanency of its own. It is always too late to change an error once it goes into print. Too late to regret when the wrong headline has been presented to the public. Unlike other media, newspapermen work in a permanency which other media do not share. No other message can be altered after publication. Once a false and harmful message is written, newspapermen are doubly concerned about the effects of what they write, about the standards they set for themselves, and about the relationship they maintain with their readers.

2. If this much is obvious, what is not so obvious is how the profession itself has defined its own problems and what it proposes to do about them. True, questions of ethics involve moral judgements, and moral judgements are likely to differ because values and norms differ. Nevertheless, they should not be avoided because the professional standards of responsibility and competence of newspapers are daily being put to the test.

The problem here is a problem of definition: what is the standard by which we measure newspaper ethics? Where and what do we look to find the definitive code of conduct for newspapers and its journalists? Like the problem itself, the answer is equally indefinite.
The difficulties met here have similarities to some of those encountered in our legal system. Legal principles have evolved and become established through the years by a system of precedents. Case law has slowly and carefully helped to define these principles, many of which have subsequently been incorporated into statute. There is a lesson to be learnt here.

Newspaper ethics do not constitute a system of morality or behaviour which can be fully and adequately defined in any specific code of conduct. Ultimately, it is only by building up a corpus of case studies where the work of the journalist is properly tested, challenged and assessed each time for the ethical standards he employs that we can set standards with useful and practical guidelines.

Until such time when this is done, the problem of newspaper ethics and social responsibility remains. Whether it concerns the right to fair comment, or the liberty to invade an individual’s privacy, or engage in sensationalism, or lapse into misreporting or misrepresentation, the underlying professional and ethical questions need urgent attention.

I would suggest that this problem be examined with four broad considerations in mind namely; the role we assign to the press, the demands of commercial viability, the influence of the government over the press, and the profile of our newspaper audience.
Thereafter we may be able to have some idea about what we can do about the general problem.

5. As I said just now, a primary consideration is what is our conception of the role of the press — both that of the readers as well as of the practitioners. Every newspaper needs the support and goodwill of its readership to be able to sustain itself economically as well as editorially. The degree of support it receives from its audience is probably a fair indication of the extent to which their expectations coincide.

5. Generally speaking, newspapers are expected to perform many functions. To inform, to report on news and events, to educate, to entertain, to provide comment and to assist in public debate on issues of import. At a different level, newspapers are also expected to defend and uphold the public interest, as well as to perform a crusading role in specific cases.

7. Questions of ethical standards and the social responsibility of a newspaper come into play when these expectations are translated into print. Difficulties are perhaps best illustrated by example. Given the fact that every newspaper has only a limited amount of space everyday, for news and
commentaries, editors are required to decide how much of it should be devoted to the debates in the Dewan Rakyat as opposed to the matrimonial affairs of a well-known movie actress. Both can be regarded as news worth reading. One is probably more important than the other, although the other may be able to lay a stronger claim to having more drama and excitement. Should loud, if not sensational, headlines be used to direct attention to stories which make for comparatively dull reading but which nevertheless have far-reaching implications for society? How much space should a pretty face take up in the newspaper when there is news and pictures of war and tragedy in the Lebanon and Rhodesia? What kind of reaction would be provoked if a newspaper published a story about the private life of, say, a cabinet minister? Does a newspaper exercise a good sense of social responsibility by reporting on the problems of the urban poor but ignoring the rural poor? Does it offend public sensibilities to print ghastly pictures of dismembered bodies taken at the scene of an air crash? Is it proper for a reporter to print a story he obtained by trickery from a government official whose duty it was to provide him with the details in the first place, but refused to do so? Is it unethical for a newspaper to educate young girls, including unmarried ones, about precautions they should take to guard against unwanted babies? Is it improper to print pictures of sweet young things in two-
or even in the briefest one-piece? Indeed, what's the public interest in all these cases? How should a paper discharge its duty to its readers? What kind of balance and emphasis should be placed on each of these items? All these are questions of social responsibility, questions which newspaperman grapple with everyday.

8. There is a second dimension of concern which has equally great influence on a newspaper's professional competence and integrity. This concerns the economics of the newspaper industry. "Newspapers exist as businesses," let us not forget. "And like all businesses, its first job is to survive, to be economically viable, to make profits." Since a newspaper must pay or perish, considerations of journalistic excellence must often compromise with the need to be commercially viable.

9. It is obvious that all this has far-reaching implications for the profession. Newspapers which are not financially strong are more likely to resort to sensationalism and circulation-promoting gimmicks. They are unable to recruit competent staff or to give them adequate training. The dangers of misreporting, misrepresentation, unfair comment, and generally unbalanced editorial content, are more likely to
occur in newspapers facing financial difficulties. In the end it is the consumer who suffers. The question is: is it possible to reconcile the claims of commerce with the claims of society? Is it possible to have a newspaper practise high standards of professional competence and integrity and at the same time highly profitable?

10. There is a third category of concern, ladies and gentlemen, which perhaps has greater bearing on this part of the world than on many others. I refer to the dominant and pervasive role of the government in developing societies such as ours. This feature is not peculiar to Malaysia, of course, for throughout the world many central governments have found it necessary to exert strong leadership to unite their countries and to marshall its people and resources in search of progress and development. For this purpose, newspapers are a powerful and useful tool. In circumstances such as these, a newspaper's professional responsibility to report and to comment independently and freely has to be balanced with its duty to subscribe to common social aims and objectives. That much is clear and accepted.
In practice, difficulties abound, however. Since the right to know and the freedom to report or comment are often circumscribed by considerations of national interest as defined by the powers that be, such justifications can easily turn into mere excuses to gag or cow down the press. Defiance of the government in such circumstances can prove to be costly, and may lead to withdrawal of the publishing licence.

There is therefore a grey area which newspapers have to live with, an area not easily defined or properly understood by both sides. It has been argued that this indefinitiveness gives room for newspaper editors to manoeuvre, as it were. But on the other hand, it is this very fact which at the same time makes it difficult for editors to make decisions and discharge their professional responsibilities to their readers.

Perhaps the point can be illustrated by a few examples. It is a well-known fact that there are in this country thousands of refugees from Indochina. There are also thousands of refugees in Sabah who have come from the Philippines. And yet, newspapers virtually do not report on the human drama or the effects of war and massive social upheaval involved.
Is there a reason? Is the public interest compromised if local newspapers carry stories on these incidents? Another example: last week the Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong visited Malaysia, and next month the Chinese Premier Teng Hsiao Ping will be visiting us. Would it be improper for a local newspaper to present a viewpoint about these visits which may differ from the government’s? Or take the case of the shooting of a civilian by a gangster in broad daylight in front of a crowd of people -- should the press co-operate with police requests not to publish any report of the incident pending completion of investigations? What about direct criticisms of the government itself? At what point does criticism become destructive instead of constructive? In each and every one of these cases, what is the public interest? Where do we draw the unwritten line?

Many journalists suspect that the government here sometimes exercise double standards in its approach to these problems -- one for foreign publications, some of them widely circulated in this country, and another for the local press. This, of course, is a problem in itself, but again, it does illustrate the difficulties of operating in the grey area I referred to.
The fourth consideration which I think deserves examination is the structure or profile of our newspaper audience. Our press is expected to provide a diet which suits the tastes and the needs of the highly educated as well as the barely literate, the rich as well as the poor, urbanites as well as rural folk, readers of different racial backgrounds with different mother tongues, cultures, religions, and values. Can it be done? Can newspapers discharge this duty?

Some answers, of course, can be obtained by examining the content of our newspapers. But the conclusion will be fairly uniform. Most newspapers try not to specialise, and if there is any indication as to what their target audience is, it is that which will ensure maximum sales. So, the social responsibilities of a newspaper are inevitably compromised in the process.

So where does all this lead us to? I come back to what I alluded to in my opening remarks, namely, that although the questions of newspaper ethics continue to be very relevant and very much questioned, not enough thinking has gone into it. The newspaper profession itself must carry the major share of this blame, and hopefully will do something about it. If the press wants to maintain and develop its professional competence and safeguard its integrity, it must itself act to
define its own ethics and its sense of social responsibility.
Most important of all, it must not allow others to define and to impose their own restraints on it.