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MEDIA ETHICS IN ASIA:
BETWEEN RELATIVELY AND ABSOLUTISM

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MEDIA ETHICS IN ASIA:
BETWEEN RELATIVITY AND ABSOLUTISM

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As far as media ethics in Asia is concerned, about all one can say is that it is a patchwork of differing systems ranging from rather strict duty-oriented Confucian communitarianism to the pragmatic Machiavellianism of Han Fei-tse. The various religions of Asia play a big role not only in the intellectual development of ethical systems but also in the everyday activities of the average citizens. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam especially are instrumental in determining ethical norms, and unlike the West, Asian religious beliefs, metaphysical traditionalism, and academic philosophy are all wrapped together in one package.

One might ask: Is there a specific Asian ethics, and if so, what is its main characteristics. Certainly I am unable to answer definitively this question that many of your own moral thinkers have wrestled with for centuries, but I shall try to give you a few of my own beliefs, tinged as they are with Western ethnocentrism.

From my study of ethics generally and from my look at Asian ethical philosophy in recent years, I think I can definitely say this: There is no definite, exclusive genre of ethics called Asian ethics. Westerners are prone to see Asia as a great monolith and ascribe to it a kind of religious and philosophical monism steeped in community-loyalty, conformity, order, and social harmony and stability. Perhaps that is what Asia WAS in the past—cooperating, tightly-knit families, striving for enlightenment and harmony, eschewing materialism and enthroning spirituality. But as I see this is changing if it has not already changed.

The new God of Materialism and Money, inherited largely from the West, has all but drowned out the voices of Gandhi, Mohammed, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang-tse, and Mo ti. And this new God, unlike the earlier ones that stressed personal morality, meditation, right-living, habitual good manners and care for others, is a materialistic God that invites everyone to live well, have gadgets and businesses and big bank accounts. It is eating away, as I see it, at the roots of Asian values that
emphasize community as well as the integrity of the socially responsible individual person.

I see this happening from the western borders of India and Pakistan, through China, Japan, the Koreas, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Also I find that few people want to talk with me about media ethics—saying only in effect that media ethics is so relative that there is not much to say about it. Seemingly gone is the old traditional stress on right-thinking and right-living as expounded by the sages and gurus of this vast area.

Instead much of the talk is about development, about economic miracles, about social benefits bestowed by the governments, about journalism that is compatible with the political situation, about a press that is public-spirited and economically viable. In short, the talk still has the ring of communitarianism about it, but it is communitarianism based on economics, not on basic values and morality.

Perhaps I am being unfair. Perhaps what I see in Asia is a healthy desire to better itself materially and to provide citizens with the physical enjoyments of life. Perhaps beneath this Americanization of the continent still lie the old and basic religious and moral foundations. But as I see lurid, ever-more-sexy advertisements in the newspapers and on TV and see the tattooed and half-clothed young people jumping about to the primitive beat of drums, I am not sure that I am not correct.

The media, quite naturally, tend to push the limits of restrained morality as far as possible. I see it all over Asia. While condemning Western journalism at international conferences for its shallowness, extremism, vulgarity, and negativism, many Asian newspapers and TV programs reproduce as closely as possible the Western counterparts they have been condemning.

Recently I asked a journalist here about his ethical guiding principle. His reply: My paper tries to do what is in the public interest.

Good, I thought, but exactly what is in the public interest? Certainly, as a guiding principle, this gives very little direction. Public interest, like beauty, is perhaps in the eye of the beholder. This, of course, leads to a conclusion I think is valid: Media ethics is relative. It is relative and situational. It has a diverse character, tailored to fit the particular mass medium, the particular person, the particular stage in a country’s development, and the particular type of government at the time.

As my students often tell me, this conclusion is not very helpful. It does not give them any hard-and-fast rules to follow. I often wonder what they want—rules such as “A journalist should never deviate from the truth.” For many journalists it is just such a deviation from the truth that makes a journalistic decision ethical. One thing we should remember is that ethics is not law. It is self-regulation. It is, in essence, self-
censorship or self-control. And since a journalistic decision is not binding and is voluntary, many journalists will think and act differently. Therefore as long as we are speaking of ethics, and not law, we must be willing to recognize that journalistic ethical behavior will vary.

As an editor I may choose not to print the name of the rape victim or a list of juvenile law-breakers. My editor friend down the street may choose to print. Which of us is ethical? Perhaps we are both ethical—just following different ethical theories. I am thinking of the bad consequences to the rape victim and the juveniles, and therefore I will not publish. My friend is thinking of telling the whole story—as much of the truth as he has verified; therefore he or she will publish.

Some media in Asia, I have learned, have a set of general principles—they call them ethical standards—that they insist all employees must follow. These are, in a sense, internal rules for the journalists of that newspaper. What are the sanctions for breach of these ethical standards? The offending journalist can be admonished, or warned, or demoted, or fired. Journalists however are seldom fired for breaking an ethical standard. Actually what the newspaper has done is to set up “laws” and the breaking of these laws can be punished. Quite differently with ethics—ethical standards are really individual and internal (they are in the mind) and they cannot be punished by an outside force.

Of course there are some rather commonly held principles that almost all journalists pay lip service to. I say “pay lip service to” because I know that they are quite often ignored in real life journalism. The humanistically inclined journalist will probably say that the media should avoid invading privacy, should be accurate in reporting, should be sensitive to grieving persons, be even-handed in reporting, and responsibly use technology in gathering information.

All right. But what is privacy as it relates to journalism? (Nobody seems to know.) What does the term “accurate reporting” mean? (I can be accurate in my story and still have a biased story.) What are the limits of sensitivity in the covering of tragedies? And...finally...all journalists may say they want to be responsible. But what does “responsibility” entail. It might, in certain situations, entail lying; it might in certain situations entail biasing the story, and in some instances responsible journalism might even mean ignoring a story altogether.

What are some of the ways media are trying to be more ethical or responsible? They are talking more about ethics. They are sending staffers to conferences such as this one sponsored by AMIC. They are publishing codes of ethics. They are employing ombudspersons (readers’ representatives). They are publishing critical journals. They are setting up press councils, and they are trying to involve all segments of the community in editorial decisions.
It seems that many ethicists and journalists want to have a kind of generally approved or consensus ethics. I doubt if this will ever come about, but there are, as I see it, three ways that a kind of monolithic journalistic ethics can come about. Or, let’s say three ways that progress can be made toward such a common ethics. But we need to say at the outset that a libertarian, laissez-faire, highly individualistic system of ethics will only result in a pluralistic or heterogeneous ethics and may well result in a kind of anarchical or nihilistic ethics. With that said, let us look briefly at the three possibilities:

First, there could be an ethical system basically determined by the government or some social authority such as a religion. This ethical pressure would approach legal restraints since the journalists would know what they must do if they don’t want the law to come down on them. It would, however, provide a kind of common journalistic ethics for the country.

Second, there would be an ethical system determined by the profession itself. Journalists through their professional organization could set up ethical standards which would be absolute and universal throughout the country. Journalists deviating from such standards could be, at the most, expelled from journalism.

Third, there could be one that might be called the voluntary ethical sensitivity system. This is the one I prefer. Here the journalists through a common education, in keeping with their cultural values and through a moral awareness possibly coming from their families or their religion, would voluntarily decide to be ethical according to these cultural determinants. The morally aware and well-educated journalists would then freely accept common ethical standards without any outside interference.

In most parts of the world the first system seems to be predominant, with ethical standards fusing into legal sanctions. In the West it seems that the trend toward professionalization is growing and offering a possibility for a unified ethics. This would retain journalistic freedom to a large extent, but would at the same time assure some conformity to journalistic actions. What this would mean would be a more exclusive organization of journalists, with a common education, common entrance requirements, a common code of ethics, and a method of expelling “unethical” members of the profession. Also in the West, but to varying degrees in other parts of the world, the third possibility exists: the
conforming of media ethics through personal education and a heightened moral sensitivity. This one, of course, assures the greatest degree of journalistic freedom.

I believe—and have always believed—that the ideal moral rules are those best calculated to serve everyone’s interest in the long run. And there will be those times when these rules will call for a person to sacrifice his or her immediate and selfish motives. It seems to me that all rules of conduct must be judged by their tendency to achieve desirable rather than undesirable ends, and to bring about more well-being than harm and pain. Therefore, moral rules can all be considered utilitarian.

In Asia, with its heterogeneous nature, universal ethical principles are difficult to find. Nations are at different stages of development, their political and economic ideologies differ, their values vary from culture to culture, and varied religions have a big impact on moral standards. It is, indeed, difficult to have a meaningful ethical code for any single country, much less the whole of Asia. Nations dealing with other nations, just as individuals dealing with other individuals, need to have reliable information on which to form opinions, make decisions, and take actions. Therefore, the transmission of reliable information among nations is, in my view, the overriding ethical imperative.

There are many other moral considerations that are pertinent to Asian media ethics, but credible information flow seems to me to be paramount. So, perhaps, ultimately there is but one overriding transnational ethical norm: Journalists everywhere should be truthful, unbiased and thorough in their reports. Or at least they should constantly try to be.

I’m not sure you can think of many other ethical principles that you feel apply, or should apply, to all Asian journalism. But we should try to isolate these and discuss them at conferences such as this and in our universities and in our newsrooms. In the U.S. we admire certain ethical values that seem to be common in Asia generally. We think of such things as respect for the family, respect for elders, respect for national leaders, a desire for harmony and national solidarity, a love of peace and tranquillity, a respect for nature, a desire not to lose face, an antipathy to argument, and on and on. We admire these values, but I must admit our journalists pay little attention to them in their daily work.

I believe there is much truth in the old stereotype of Asians and Westerners. Westerners are seen as more individualistic; Asians more
Westerners more competitive; Asians more cooperative. Westerners more concerned with disharmony; Asians with harmony. Westerners more disorderly; Asians more orderly. Westerners more critical of authority; Asians more respectful of authority. The Asian proclivities are inherited from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The Western proclivities come mainly from Greek philosophy, the Renaissance in Europe, the 18th Century Enlightenment, and from the Protestant Reformation.

The above is obviously a kind of stereotype, but traditionally there has been some truth in it. And journalistic standards of ethics, it would seem, must take these regional values into account.

It is true—at least from my reading and observations—that many of the Asian stereotypes are rapidly changing. Asians are taking on many of the values of Westerners—in their love of money and their materialistic pursuits, in their funky music, in their clothing, in their educational practices, in media sex and advertising, in the destruction of the environment, in their criminal activities, in their constant construction, and in their preoccupation with athletic events.

Perhaps television, the internet, and more frequent travel and education abroad are all giving the world a more common culture. And, if this continues, then perhaps a global or regional standard of media ethics will be possible. Certainly media ethics in Asia will have to give the globalization of values careful consideration. This globalization in itself can be a very important ethical problem. Is it a good thing? How far should it go? Is it a form of cultural imperialism? Such questions must be asked and debated.

In conclusion, let me express my sincere desire that media ethical consciousness be raised throughout Asia and everywhere else, for that matter. And I applaud conferences like this one in Kuala Lumpur that are fostering discussion of vital ethical issues. It seems to me that those of us interested in the media and society should encourage journalists to do what they can to bring more stability, harmony, rationality, and mutual trust to our social environments.

What we don’t want to do is to push media ethics over into a corner. We don’t want to de-emphasize its importance. We don’t want to stop discussing media ethics and maximizing its importance.
We don’t want to begin considering journalism as simply a business and not a public service. We don’t want to begin thinking of journalism as a kind egocentric pragmatism.

In short, we don’t want to relegate media ethics to some old traditional and outmoded time that is not in tune with our postmodern goals. In short, my friends, we must be careful not to become too materialistically driven. We must continue to think of people and not just of machines. We must continue to think of doing good and not just doing what is successful and financially expedient. We must determine that in our world of technology and materialism where we all seem to all be becoming technocrats, we as media people at the very least can be humanistic technocrats.

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