

ONO-Session: Media ethics in the trenches: journalists should do no harm

Friday 17 May

Moderator: Ignaz Staub, TX Group, Switzerland

Welcome to our panel on media ethics – a topic with which probably all of us have dealt with at one time or another, be it as working journalists or as ombuds. As to codes of practice regarding standards and ethics, you may be familiar with the code of the US-Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). It states: "Public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility."

Meanwhile, the AP's Statement of News Values and Principles declares: "We abhor inaccuracies, carelessness, bias or distortions. We will not knowingly introduce rumour or false information into material intended for publication or broadcast; nor will we distort visual content."

Each of our organizations probably has some code of ethics though from my experience I'm not so sure whether all employees of a newspaper or a broadcaster are always sufficiently aware of these codes. Like other ethical systems, the ethics of journalism include the principle of "limitation of harm".

This principle involves enhanced respect for vulnerable groups and the withholding of certain details from reports, such as the names of minor children, crime victims' names, or information not materially related to the news report where the release of such information might, for instance, harm someone's reputation or put them at undue risk. There is also the question regarding the appropriate reporting of suicide and mental health.

In his book "Ethics and the Media: An Introduction", published in 2011, media ethicist Stephen J. Ward from the University of British Columbia lists five types of journalistic harm: Physical harm, monetary harm, reputational harm, psychological harm and social harm.

Physical harm provokes violent reactions in response to journalism. For instance, a naming and shaming anti-paedophile campaign by the now defunct "News of the World" once resulted "in hundreds of residents taking to the street...to protest against suspected paedophiles."

Monetary harm pertains to "negative effects on one's wealth and future income". Ward also mentions that seemingly innocuous types of journalism such as criticism – the reviewing of food, music, films, theatre, travel – can equally inflict monetary harm if its message is negative.

Reputational harm affects "the reputation and career of citizens and organizations". A recent example is the negative reporting by some media about the activities of UNWRA in Gaza which has had real-life consequences for affected Palestinians.

You may not remember a “Time” magazine June 1994 cover which featured O.J. Simpson’s mugshot with a dramatic filter overly that caught flak for darkening his skin colour to make him look more sinister - and therefore guilty. The cover raised the ethical question of how far a photo manipulation may go.

More recently, Justice Juan Merchan who presides over Donald Trump’s hush-money trial in Manhattan admonished reporters covering the trial after he dismissed a juror who said her family and friends deduced who she was by following public reports of the case.

Psychological harm is described by Stephen J. Ward as “harmful impact on one’s mental states” - for instance by invading the of privacy when dealing with victims of trauma after a terrorist attack like the recent massacre by Hamas on October 7th. Alysson Watson of the University of Newcastle calls “digital death knocks” a practice by which journalists after for instance a crime or a school shooting are “mining” the social media accounts of victims or of families and friends.

Finally, social harm is “uninformed and intolerant” journalism which can “cause friction between groups in society, whip up xenophobia, support discriminatory measures against marginalized groups, misrepresents a religion or ethnic group, stereotypes ethnic groups, or supports an unjust war.” In this category, you may include American TV-networks like Fox News or One America News or websites like “Breitbart” or “The Daily Caller” which tend to resort to heavily biased reporting or outright lies.

Media ethicists acknowledge that because of journalism’s function as the Fourth Estate”, doing harm is sometimes inevitable, as for instance in the case of the Pentagon Papers or the WikiLeaks. Therefore, the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists calls on Journalists to “minimize harm rather than avoid it outright.” Some authors even claim that journalism’s unique social functions may mean that it sometimes has a duty to cause harm.

So I guess, there’s plenty to talk about in today’s panel about “Media ethics in the trenches: journalists should do no harm”. I’d like to briefly introduce our two distinguished panellists: Welcome to **Lizette Rabe**: Lizette is professor emeritus and previous chair of the Journalism Department at Stellenbosch University. She worked for about twenty years in the media industry, followed by about twenty years in media academia. She was, amongst others, board member of SANEF. As an activist for mental health awareness, she founded the Ithemba Foundation, a non-profit that focuses on awareness raising of depression and related diseases as biological diseases. Lizette will be talking about the notion “news is news” and contend that news is not, and cannot, “only” be news.

Our ONO-colleague **Bjarne Schilling** has been the Readers’ Editor at Denmark’s largest morning paper, “Politiken”, since 2010. There in Copenhagen, he’s in charge of running the daily corrections column and in addition writes a weekly comment on matters relating to ethical matters and specific grievances put forward by readers. Bjarne has had 30 years of journalistic experience at a news agency and different newspapers. Bjarne will talk about the dilemma facing journalists when reporting on hate speech and right-wing activists who create tensions among ethnic groups.