

[ONO 2024: “Fairness, responsibility, accountability: Media self-regulation in a hostile world”

Session: 17 May, 10:30: Media24 Centre

Session theme: “Media ethics in the trenches, journalists should minimise harm”]

“News is news.”

No, it is not.

Needed: An all-round, 360 degrees ethics of care

Prof Lizette Rabe, Stellenbosch University^{1}*

It is an honour to share some time and some thoughts with you on the important role of the media in our 21st century techno-driven, digital society amidst all the geopolitical trouble, turmoil and trauma on our poor planet earth – all of them coming home to roost in our psyches, where all of the trouble, turmoil and trauma have a debilitating, depressing effect.

That is why our session with its theme “Media ethics in the trenches, journalists should minimise harm” is so important.

The reason: As much as all of us agree that self-regulation is at the core of a free media, at the core of a fair, responsible and accountable media should also be self-reflection.

Our theme “Media ethics in the trenches” can be interpreted in many ways:

- that we are in the midst of a war;
- that we are under siege;
- that we are actually in the dumps.

I think all of these are applicable.

Because, in our 24/7 news cycle: How can we find the time to stand back and reflect on our profession, especially regarding this session’s theme: How to minimise harm?

Regarding the theme of the conference as a whole: How do we ensure we act in a fair, responsible, and accountable way in everything we do? With all the realities of Big Tech, AI, shrinking budgets, and shrinking newsrooms?

With the public – our readers, listeners, viewers – who are content to be fed news on their smart phones according to algorithms that is the equivalent of junk food?

With too many of us blissfully living in our own echo chambers, and not realising that if you do not pay for something, you are the product?

While news is breaking around us at a merciless pace and we want to get it first, but forget to get it right?

Plus: Never giving ourselves the opportunity to stand back and really think about what we are doing because we are so busy pushing the buttons to get it out there?

The reality is: We have no option NOT to reflect. If we want to remain relevant, and want to be seen as fair, responsible and accountable, we as the journalistic profession MUST minimise harm in the way we are practising journalism in this relentless 24/7 news cycle.

^{1*} Lizette Rabe 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 (www.ithembafoundation.org.za), a non-profit that focuses on awareness raising of depression and related diseases as biological, clinical diseases.

And I mean minimising harm in an all-around, 360 degrees way, taking everything we see, hear, and feel, into account, to minimise harm on behalf of our audiences, *and* also on behalf of us, the producers of content.

Because: We are not only affecting our audiences by the creeping desensitisation of trying to outdo other media players – we are also desensitising ourselves in a profession where one of the biggest dangers, long before the advent of a rolling deadline, is desensitisation.

And so we feed the vicious news cycle, and forget what it means to minimise harm – regarding our audiences *and* ourselves.

Of course this means we are talking *media ethics*.

I can still recall the despair in a student journalist's voice after he came back after an internship, saying the news editor (at a respected mainstream media title) told him, in a sarcastic, if not boastful, way: "Forget what you've learnt; here we don't even *know* how to spell ethics!"

As impossible as it sounds, it really happened.

Our ethical approach really is in the trenches. In the dumps, if you will.

As example a recent experience: What should have been a private matter, reaches a certain newspaper. Inevitably, nowadays, picked up somewhere on social media where nothing is private.

Of course, in the view of this particular news outlet, it is a story straight from sensationalist heaven. In the process, in the debate on a WhatsApp group of journalistic colleagues, inevitably, the phrase "News is news" is uttered.

It is simplistic, naïve, and dangerous.

Unfortunately, it is not the first time I have heard the words "News is news".

In fact, I can still hear those words reverberate in my soul, as I have also heard them uttered by a fiercely defensive night editor in a matter that changed my life. I therefore need to declare my interests. I might not be as objective – or cold, or newshoundy, or what you might call it – as was the person sitting in the night editor's chair that night when he phoned me and simply said "News is news" – and put down the phone.

Yes, news is news.

But it is also a matter of how you deal with that news.

If that is the issue, what are the questions?

There might be a number of questions, but one question should, and must, be how a newsroom should deal with an *ethics of care* approach.

Not only in terms of journalists' own self-preservation and self-reflection in how they get carried away with the news of the day (and, in the process, forget about the human beings involved).

And not only how they represent that news, including the headlines, now either on websites, or front pages, for those who still have front pages.

But also for the sake of their readership. For society. Starting by asking themselves how they contribute to traumatising an already traumatised society.

And how they, in the process, desensitise themselves.

So, as one answer in an attempt to self-preserve and self-reflect, I believe with an ethics of care approach we can serve our audiences better – and protect them from our own insensitivities.

But: We must also protect our own psyches and do ourselves a favour, as we are dealing with the underbelly of society all the time and simply get desensitised as a result of that exposure. In fact, not only do our own selves a favour, but be kinder to our psyches. *And*

do our profession justice. *And* practise a far better praxis than what we currently attempt to do.

What is an ethics of care?

It can be interpreted in many ways. A publication in 2005 had as title a three-fold approach: *The ethics of care: Personal, Political, Global* (Held, 2005).

The origins of an ethics of care can be traced back to the 1980's work of a feminist theorist when she studied how women approach dilemmas they face in real life (Gilligan, 1982). Her theory has since expanded to be a "guide for all of us in moral decision-making" (Collins, 2015:2).

Regarding the profession of journalism, the phrase a "duty of care" was first introduced in the early 2000s. This was "with the advent of digital media platforms and debates about the media's influence on societal topics" (Berns, 2004:125).

Of course, it does not only apply to the media, or specifically journalism. It is argued that "the principle of caring for others has universal appeal" (Hossain & Aucoin, 2018:2). Several aspects of care are noteworthy (Tronto, 1998:16). "Care" indeed is described as a "species activity" because it suggests how we care for one another and that it "is one of the features that make people human". Our "understanding of what will be good care depends upon the way of life [and] the set of values and conditions, of the people engaged in the caring". What needs to be decided, is what the "set of values and conditions, and the people engaged in the caring" are.

In terms of journalism, we need to decide what these guiding values and conditions must be.

Recently it was argued (Mathewson, 2021:151) that as "a robust embrace of the ethics of care, ethical journalism has the power to persuade and mobilize public opinion to demand effective action [to ameliorate unacceptable shortcomings]".

Two researchers (Steiner & Okrusch, 2011) argued that an ethic of care "provides journalists with an alternative framework for moral decision making" – one "that might help today's journalists cultivate the virtue of care as they work toward justice".

All of this mean, from a South African perspective, that we apply the philosophy of Ubuntu: "I am because you are."

Hopefully, journalists and journalism will garner more respect from their publics if they follow the tenets of an ethics of care – of Ubuntu. It was even argued (Camponez, 2014:124) that care ethics-based journalism should be an "alternative response towards a new public contract and journalism's credibility".

If we rethink our existing basic norms and values in the newsroom – regrettably, in some, it might be described as an almost institutional lack of ethics of care to our subjects, our readers, and ourselves – we might see an optimistic, and a positive, new future instead of the current pessimistic, negative, and poor outlook from the position of the inside of our newsrooms.

We might be able to replace the banal, vulgar, sensational headlines and the way we present the news in a "refreshed" way – to use an IT term, if you will – that will not only refresh our audiences, but also refresh ourselves and our profession.

In a time of fake news, the matter becomes even more serious, because we need to protect our integrity and credibility as mainstream media. But between the devil and the deep blue sea, where do we draw boundaries while striving to report facts "as close to the truth as possible", as Ben Bradlee, editor of the *Washington Post*, testified during the Watergate scandal?

Of course, while realising: *When it bleeds, it leads.*

But still: How can we present the news in different ways without harming individuals, our societies, ourselves, and our profession?

With the 300th commemoration of Immanuel Kant's birthday in 1724 (on April 22), one is reminded of his "categorical imperative" – a person's unconditional moral obligation. If categorical imperatives are "commands", or moral laws that we as human beings should follow, regardless of circumstance, of course, especially also journalists should follow them.

Kant's categorical imperative can also be described as the golden rule: "Act as you would want others to act towards all other people." Our South African philosophy of Ubuntu, in other words.

In that sense I think we should see journalism not only as profession, but also as moral imperative: Not only that we do it, but especially how we do it.

That way we might be able to minimise harm.

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