

***The Conscience of the Journalist:
Individual Responsibility in the Media***

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INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ETHICS

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In January 2001 the Institute for Global Ethics UK Trust and the Media Society jointly organised a seminar, held at the Reform Club in London, England, on *The Conscience of the Journalist: Individual Responsibility in the Media*. It formed one of a series of conferences and seminars which the Institute has been running as part of a project *Personal Responsibility: Building a Responsible Society*, supported by the Comino and Gordon Cook Foundations, and marking the introduction of the Human Rights Act. Earlier discussions in the series had all indicated that the role of the media is paramount in the successful implementation of any new policy or programme. The power of the media to influence public opinion raised ethical questions; does responsibility lie with the proprietor, the editor or the individual journalist? This report seeks to draw out the five most important themes that ran through the evening's conversation.

Donald Trelford, president of the Media Society and former editor of *The Observer*, chaired the seminar. The panel, who were all very keen to discuss the issues, comprised Kate Adie, the award-winning BBC television correspondent; Roy Greenslade, media columnist on the *Guardian*, previously editor of the *Daily Mirror* and a senior editor on the *Sunday Times*; Rush Kidder, president and founder of the Institute for Global Ethics and a former London correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor*; and John Sweeney, of *The Observer*.

1) Ownerships and Profits

The overarching theme of ownership and profits came up time and time again. There was a strong feeling that editors place pressure on journalists, forcing them to compromise between what their editors demand and the path they would ideally like to follow (Greenslade). However, it was also recognised that editors are under equal pressure from the owners; “a private owner has total power and this is a real problem” (Greenslade).

It seems that proprietors (not journalists and editors) are the ones lacking in conscience, their only motivation being the profit that is achieved by appealing to the bottom line. With the influx of corporate owners onto newspapers (and into newsrooms), “everything has been diluted with business tactics” (Adie). The drive for profit has turned “journalists into little more than content providers” (Kidder) and news is seen as a simple commodity in this market place. In this respect, it was noted that the broadsheets were seen as little different from the tabloids. It was commented that, “a newspaper may have to be a non-profit to be reputable. It may be impossible to have private ownership, profits and ethics all at the same time” (Kidder).

A further significant aspect was the awareness that short-term contracts, which journalists are being forced to sign if they wish to remain in the profession, contributed greatly to a general feeling of insecurity. It was thought that if people were more secure in their jobs, they would be able to turn down stories that they felt uncomfortable about. This was one of the factors that inspired the sentiment that noble desires are beaten out of people while they are young. A participant noted that the older, more experienced, generations should help the younger generation avoid the pitfalls of short-term contracts.

Another participant observed that journalists are a corporate body within themselves, and perhaps the solution of conscience lies in the hands of the journalists.

2) Journalism as a Moral Profession

At best journalism is a moral profession; “it is a job where you have to make people care about things” (Sweeney). Furthermore, the role of an editor can be defined as “to find out what people need to know, and then to make them want to know it” (Kidder). In this way it was felt that journalism could serve a profound educational role in society.

It was noted that although journalists are seen very much as storytellers, not all journalists are good at it. This in turn can lead to poor journalists who chase controversial stories in order to cause outrage and achieve a public profile. However, this could also be seen as journalists performing a social function, by finding out the truth, which in turn keeps democracy in check.

It was largely felt that there was “too much lazy journalism” (Adie). The tabloids can be accused of ignoring the actual moral climate, and digging up old-fashioned attitudes. The papers can, and quite often do, appeal to the majority view by fuelling pre-existing fears. In this sense newspapers are “reactionary and play to the gallery” (Greenslade). It was commented that journalists would do better to report on stories that challenge and engage the reader rather than simply indicting the majority against the minority.

3) Ethics and language

By its very nature, ethics is a reflective activity. This means that it is easier to be moralistic as you get older and you are no longer subject to the same pressures as the younger generation. It was noted that we in the developed world have the time to reflect on such matters, a luxury which many others do not have as their concerns are about meeting the basic needs for survival (Sweeney).

Journalists need to move away from the language of economics and politics, which they are the most comfortable using, to comment on society (Kidder). There is an uneasiness about using the language of ethics, of values and of what is right and wrong behaviour. However, this is the language that most people use in their homes and everyday life. These are not alien concepts, but journalists shy away from this type of language as being far too prescriptive and emotive.

4) The Public

It was remarked that, “the public feels that all journalists lie and go along with government spin” (Trelford). It was commented that there is a general assumption among the public that the media cannot be trusted or relied upon to be truthful, an assumption which is slowly eroding public expectations of the media. The public are not receiving the media they deserve, leading to a creation of a ‘them-us’ culture between the media and the public.

This was reinforced with the idea that the public is not fully appreciative of what is involved in getting the truth. A member of the BBC commented that uncovering the truth often involves “trampling on certain individuals or groups”. Further it was felt (inside the BBC) that the public are not particularly concerned with ethics, and prefer entertainment programmes such as ‘docu-soaps’.

There was concern that the public needs to be able to express outrage, without bringing in tight regulations. Furthermore, it was asked by a participant, “what can...people do about ethics and integrity?” The two routes that were suggested as being open to the public were writing letters to the editor, and by appealing to the Press Complaints Commission. Editors created the PCC in 1990, after the NUJ Code of Ethics failed, and the broadsheets have largely used the commission to bring the tabloids to heel. A panellist commented that letters to the editor confirm the idea that journalism has to be a conversation, a give and take with the audience (Kidder).

5) Technology

The ever-increasing pace of the development of technology has resulted in a higher level of competition. With the advent of digital cameras, satellites and the internet, reports can be made and filmed by a single person in one of the remotest areas of the world and be broadcast almost instantaneously over the web. The competition is stiffer than ever - to break the story first, to show the first pictures - in such an environment "the capacity for deliberate judgement goes" (Kidder).

The 24-hour news stations have continuously to search out stories to fill their time, and this creates further problems. It is not unknown for newsrooms to "make any story at all stand-up as they have so much time to fill" (Adie). It was noted by a participant that the conscience of the journalist is engaged when they can find no story, but they are still expected to produce one by their employers, a situation common to all those working within the media.

It could be said that if the media is seen as a microcosm of society, the increasing focus on technology and profits over values and integrity is apparent in the media, as in society at large. Have we expected too much by asking the media to be free from the trends that affect the rest of society?

If the media wish to retain their credibility as producing real social comment that challenges society's complacency, and if journalists want to be known on the strength of their writing and for the clarity and integrity of their thinking, then further debate needs to take place on the role of ethics and responsibility within the media.

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