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Chay Florentino-Hofilena
Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

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Commentary

Keeping best practices in journalism alive



Chay Florentino-Hofileña

Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

Public regard for journalists or self-acclaimed journalists has not improved in the past few years. Newspaper readership continues to decline even as cable television, the Internet, and even pirated DVDs are offering a disgruntled public other information and entertainment options besides television or radio.

The media get their much-needed shot in the arm whenever there are disasters or crisis situations in any part of the world. Suddenly, there is a sharp rise in news consumption as the public's appetite for information reaches abnormal proportions. Even for just a few hours or even days, the media get to feel good about being relevant and needed again. And depending on how well they do their jobs, public contempt either worsens or diminishes.

How has it come to this? Are news organizations at fault or are journalism schools not producing enough good and ethical journalists? Are universities doing a lousy job of preparing future and present journalists to cope with the pressures and challenges of real-life journalism? Do news organizations end up corrupting the greenhorns who carry with them the idealism and enthusiasm of youth? Are they not doing enough in terms of retooling practising journalists?

For the longest time, questions about how journalism ought to be taught have persisted. Should the emphasis be on skills—research, running after the story, interviewing, writing, or even newsroom management? Or should it be on critical thinking and values—ethics and journalism issues that allow some introspection for practitioners, or new perspectives on politics or international relations to enrich context in reporting, for example?

Journalism is in the rut that it is in today because practitioners forget or do not know what its basic principles are. Some practitioners who have no educational background whatsoever in journalism think that all it involves is interviewing, getting the story, writing, reporting, and outdoing the competition. In the field, after all, this is what is done day in and day out.

There is little time for reflection or constructive criticism of the work that is churned out on deadline. There is little debate about the rightness or wrongness of editorial decisions because harmony in the newsroom is paramount. There is little opportunity

for peer criticism because journalists are part of a small community whose members are bound to bump into each other during coverage. The unspoken rule, especially in Asia, is: better to be silent than to be critical lest one be perceived to be too self-righteous. Public criticism of colleagues in the profession is something that many Asian journalists are not completely comfortable with. Indeed, journalists sometimes behave as if they were part of a fraternity.

Breaking the fraternity rules and stretching the limits is what the re-education or retraining of journalists is thus all about. Everyone is quick to acknowledge the low public regard for journalists but alarm signals have not reached the highest levels, it seems, going by the hesitation of practitioners to adopt drastic measures to correct serious and grave flaws in the practice of journalism. In the Philippines, for example, where the media are fairly developed, “industry-wide” self-regulation is practically non-existent. Nothing similar to the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States exists. Citizens, too, do not have recourse when they feel maligned or feel they have been untreated fairly by a newspaper.

The only organization that is making an attempt at self-regulation but is failing quite miserably is the Philippine Press Institute through its Philippine Press Council (PPC) committee. Attempts by individuals to have their complaints addressed have, thus far, resulted in nothing dramatic. No less than the former Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo, who brought a complaint in 2004 before the PPC against newspaper publisher Maximo Soliven (now deceased), ended up filing a P50-million (US\$1-million) libel case against him. Perhaps because Romulo felt it was taking too long for the PPC to act on his complaint, he went to the courts instead, seeking redress. This, in turn, became basis for the PPC to drop its involvement in the case. Yet even if it continued to handle the case, the PPC would not have been able to oblige member-newspapers to comply with its recommendations—in this case, possible enforcement of a citizen’s right of reply. But even this right is not guaranteed anywhere.

In some newspapers with existing codes of ethics or an appointed Ombudsman, there have been no reports of erring journalists being fired for unethical practices. Ironically, journalists know who among their own colleagues are on the take yet choose to remain silent. Only one TV network of late has been known to take its journalists to task for violating their code of ethics—ordering one suspended, and another fired. This has been the exception, however, as by and large, media organizations prefer to be on their own when it comes to disciplining errant journalists. Those in broadcast at least have the Association of National Broadcasters in the Philippines, but no similar organization exists for the print media. The National Press Club has degenerated into a social club, with little attention given to upholding journalistic standards.

Journalism’s primary obligation is to the truth and its first loyalty is to citizens, Kovach and Rosenstiel have written in their *“Elements of Journalism.”* The assertions are so fundamental, it is tempting to assume that all practising journalists know these by heart and fully grasp their implications. Yet assuming this can be a fatal mistake because many have become too immersed and trapped in the “realities” of journalism that, they find all sorts of justifications for compromises that are dictated by profit and commercialism or, simply survival.

For others, complete ignorance about these basic tenets of journalism has caused them to compromise their integrity as journalists and engage in unethical practices like

corruption. It is the latter which destroys journalism the most and tarnishes its noble intentions. For this reason, it is imperative for journalism education to consistently emphasize the values and principles of journalism.

An education that focuses on skills alone makes of journalists mere artisans. And journalism is not just about reporting and writing; it is writing and choosing stories anchored on a vision and based on values—truth, independence, fairness, justice, to name a few. It is about arming citizens with information they need and want so that they can make the right decisions on key issues that will affect their lives and their future. Given such a mission, how can journalism be trifled with?

Teaching journalism

Effective retooling for journalists who have been practising the craft for at least three years requires a review of the basics of journalism in the context of work environment realities. Many journalists who have been working continuously for at least five years often complain about burn-out and the accompanying need to pause and re-examine how well or how badly they have done. Others feel the need to step back and reassess whether they have upheld the standards of journalism or to simply find answers to bugging questions about the craft. Still others need to find out about new trends and how best they could cope with developments in the field. The rest want to find out whether they want to continue as journalists or to move on.

Journalists at this stage of their lives appreciate the opportunity to talk and to discuss with peers who feel the same anxiety they feel about the practice of journalism. It is a luxury to be unhurried and not be pressured by deadlines; it is a privilege to be listening to and sharing ideas with colleagues who have similar experiences. It becomes a pleasure to debate and argue and then somehow come to an agreement on contentious issues.

To simulate and capture the experiences and dilemmas faced by journalists on the ground, case studies are ideal. They invite critical thinking and a re-examination of commonly accepted, though not necessarily correct, practices in journalism. Journalists are quick to identify with the situations that are actual, if not close to their experiences and work environments.

For instance, what to do when attending a press conference where freebies are openly distributed and refusing them could be construed as rude? In the West, the imperatives are clear: say no and refuse. In Asia, there are sensitivities and nuances to watch out for that make these situations more complicated than they should be. In a workshop on investigative journalism for broadcast journalists held in Jakarta last November (2006), participants admitted that it is not that easy to turn down token presents especially if the giver is well-meaning. In one Indonesian TV network, a cap on the cost of a gift that a journalist may receive is set, prompting questions about what differentiates that gift from another that could be just a few rupiahs more expensive. Similarly, there are situations where TV reporters are unable to “rein in” their crew who are predisposed to accepting envelopes or other freebies given during press conferences. One participant volunteered that, at the very least, he makes sure that if he is the reporter of the team, the rest—just like him—do not take any of the freebies. The discussions highlighted the need to educate not just reporters themselves but even other members

of the crew about the values of journalism; they also showed the need to impress upon these crew members that they, too, are journalists bound by the same ethical standards.

And what if the network's owner decides to run for public office and enjoins everyone in his employ to support his candidacy? The subtext is quite obvious: support me or find employment elsewhere. For younger journalists, it would be easy to quit and look for alternatives but for older ones with a family to support, the options can appear limited.

In repressive societies where freedom of the press is totally alien, upholding the principle of truth can be difficult for journalists. Does the practice of journalism in these societies then become less ethical? For journalists trapped in this situation, it could be tempting, too, to accept things as they are and forget about the ideals of journalism. It becomes more complex when lives are endangered in the process of fighting for freedom of expression or freedom of the press. In discussing cases like this, creative ways of coping with the situation, finding ways of stretching the limits, or even bringing about a greater appreciation for existing freedoms among journalists in democratic societies can come about.

Case studies ultimately force journalists to define their non-negotiables, their own bottom lines, which they cannot and will not subject to compromises. Besides exposure to case studies, journalists need to continuously broaden their knowledge, too, about bigger issues and be updated about the latest developments in other relevant fields of study. Thus, beyond the issues close to home and to the heart, there is a need for wider exposure to other disciplines such as economics, communications, political science, history, sociology, international relations, or even the humanities, because these can enrich reporting and writing skills.

Many practising journalists who go back to school after years spent in the field find this exposure refreshing and a welcome break from the predictability of journalism. They find that more than honing skills in interviewing or writing, for example, the wider exposure also broadens their perspective and allows them to see old issues in a new light.

For example, brushing up on both the contemporary issues and history of Southeast Asia can add a new dimension to reporting, as well as better understanding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or regional conflicts. The study of philosophy can improve clarity of thought, reasoning, and decision-making on ethical issues and questions—for instance, if philosopher James Rachels speaks about the value of relativism because of diversity in cultures, how can this be reconciled with the need for universal values as required by ethics?

Certainly, theory can complement the mastery of practical skills in journalism. And the craft can only become the richer and the better for it.

Looking to the future

With the advent of globalization and online information technology, journalism must keep up to remain relevant. Nowadays, the market value of journalists is directly proportional to their ability to handle or work in a multimedia environment. Thus, a journalist who specializes in print should also be able to write for online news sites,

if not report for television. Similarly, broadcast journalists are expected to be able to write for the print media as well, if and when the need arises.

The name of the game is multitasking and multimedia skills. For media conglomerates, operations become more cost-efficient when journalists under their employ are able to produce at least two different outputs from a single story.

Because of these new demands on journalists, journalism education and training programs cannot afford to focus on only one medium; it would be a disservice to both practitioners and would-be journalists. This means that trainers and teachers themselves must be comfortable with multimedia and the issues associated with them. Thus, they must be conversant, for example, with issues and cases related to the use of hidden cameras in the same way that they are familiar with those relating to plagiarism. Similarly, research using online resources should be done fairly well as research done on foot.

Finally, part of preparing for the future is being able to recognize and anticipate issues and trends in journalism. What will journalism be like five to ten years from now, given technological developments and changing market preferences and behaviour? How best can journalism thrive and survive in this changing environment? What models of success and failure are out there from which valuable lessons can be drawn? Where are potential threats to the viability of journalism coming from and how should these be addressed? How can the public or citizens become partners of journalists in their work of documenting news as it happens and as it unfolds? Are there new models of media ownership emerging anywhere that can better protect the independence of journalists and the work that they do? And what are the benchmarks of “best practices” in journalism practice and journalism education?

These are but some of the difficult questions that journalists—either as individuals or as a community—have to grapple with. Training and education via research and discussion should be able to facilitate finding the answers.

In the end, mid-career journalists are able to affirm for themselves what excellent and ethical journalism is through their own peers. Coming together for advanced studies, continuing adult education or training provides them an opportunity to network and find support from each other. It becomes crucial therefore to offer them a support group that can reinforce their newfound skills or abilities well beyond a training course or program. For instance, graduate students of a Media Ethics class I taught were eager to set up an e-group and mailing list so that they could continue discussions on ethical dilemmas even after the end of the course. They have tentatively named the group “Asia Forum on Journalism Ethics” and plan to include past alumni from different countries in Asia who have taken the course. The list is up but needs more activity. It is, however, a starting point.

Many journalists are lone rangers who work with a fixed eye on deadlines. There is little time for prolonged discussions and consultations about what the right thing to do is in a particular situation. Often, it is within the confines of a newsroom or the circles of colleagues that these discussions are made. Widening this circle to include other colleagues from other countries and “internationalizing” discussions through a mailing list, for example, can provide added perspective and support, and even inspiration. The

shared experience while in the classroom or the training sessions will be the bond that will tie them together.

Given the growing demands on journalists, they will certainly need all the support that they can get. Educators and trainers alike should be able to provide them with the necessary support mechanism that will allow it. After all, excellence in journalism education, to my mind, demands: (1) breaking comfort zones and stretching the limits of what is generally accepted practice; (2) re-emphasising the fundamental values of journalism that demand stretching the limits; (3) being attuned to the situation on the ground and being sensitive to cultural nuances that create ethical dilemmas; (4) going beyond the journalistic perspective to include perspectives from other disciplines; (5) developing multimedia skills and expertise in multimedia issues; and (6) effective follow through.

We want not just reporters, but critical thinkers who can both capably lead citizens and walk alongside them in their quest for truth.

Notes

¹ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

² James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism: How Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes," in *Ethics, History, Theory, and Contemporary Issues*, by Steven M. Cahn and Peter Markie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 548-557.

IN 1998, Ma. Rosario 'Chay' Florentino-Hofileña exposed what journalists in the Philippines acknowledge is a perennial problem in the media industry but are hesitant to discuss in public—corruption in the media. Her extensive documentation and interviews with media practitioners resulted in a book in the same year — *News for Sale: The Corruption of the Philippine Media* — published jointly by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (www.pcij.org) and the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (www.cmfr.com.ph/). She updated this in 2004 to cover that year's presidential elections. The book was renamed: *News for Sale: The Corruption and Commercialization of the Philippine Media*. Chay covered the 1986 "People Power" Philippine revolution for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, was a freelance writer for publications in Dallas and San Francisco, a senior reporter for The Manila Chronicle and ABC-5 television in the Philippines. She was deputy editor for The Manila Times and associate editor of Newsbreak Magazine, for which she now writes regularly. She teaches Media Ethics in the Ateneo de Manila's journalism graduate program.