12-1-2005

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Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss16/4
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Commentary

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“Goodness, beauty and truth might be universally valued and valuable but they are neither constant over time nor uniform across the globe. Goodness and truth, like beauty, are in the eyes of beholders. Absolutes are hard to find. Plurality prevails. All of which makes the issue of values difficult for media practitioners, including journalists, and media educators, including academics. All generally eschew the “whatever it takes” answer to questions of scruple, whatever they might actually do. They wish to know – and to do – what is legal, what is moral and what is ethical, albeit that those things elude definition, uniformity and universal standardisation.”
Few would defend, let alone promote, the bad, the ugly and the untrue; certainly not in journalism or journalism education. Values there relate not only to content but to how it is obtained and presented. We prefer to believe that goodness, beauty and truth are not only more valuable but also actually widely valued. And if what we value turns out to be bad or ugly or untrue, we can always resort to a bit of judicious and persuasive “spin”, or redefinition. As an estate agent told me once, “It wasn’t a lie when I told you…”

There are strong precedents for this approach. The Australian government nearly a decade ago made an art form of the distinction between “promises” and “core promises”. And the popularity of its approach to values has been evident in its electoral success since.

Quoting the Aitaki Newsagency in Rarotonga, an e-mail from Pacific Media Watch (www.pmw.c2o.org) last October reported the Cook Islands Health Minister’s complaint, as he resigned under a cloud of audit inquiries and police investigations, that parliamentarians were “being killed by audit reports and media coverage”. The Opposition apparently agreed, at least in part. But, an audit office spokesman insisted that it was only doing its job under the law. The media, he said, tended to “hijack audit reports and put them on display”. Messengers are always at risk, not least from other messengers.

A former Justice Minister, now in Opposition, warned against auditors judging as well as investigating. According to Aitiki, however, audit reports could only be released after they had been tabled in parliament and anyone named given 30 days to respond. The departing Minister’s claim that “no-one… supports what the audit office is doing” was left for the public to ponder and decide.

The question is not so much about what happened or not but whether reporting it is good or bad, beautiful or ugly and true or untrue. It may, of course, be ugly but true and thus good.

Several years ago, Hima Douglas, then head of the press and broadcasting authority in Niue told the Pacific Islands News Association meeting that, unlike “the way in the West” (New Zealand, Australia and beyond), the role of the media was not to break news but to explain it and hold the community together.

Small societies don’t need to break news, he said, because everyone knows what has happened. What is needed instead is an explanation of events and a discussion of the issues they raise. Even in the West, as Denis McQuail (2002) has observed, the media must communicate and that means more than simply sending and receiving messages. It also includes forming and maintaining communities, making sense of the world and displaying who we are and what we believe.

The Pacific has other obstacles to communication. Its geography is fragmented and its sparse population is scattered across far-flung archipelagos or isolated by rugged mountains, torrential rivers and sprawling swamps. It divides into separate language groups. And, as I have observed elsewhere (Morgan in Breen, 1998), knowing something in the Pacific carries no obligation to broadcast or publish it. The custom is to be discreet. Those who know are obliged to protect what they know.
In the USA, meanwhile, Ted Glasser (1999), seeing journalism as a crucial form of social inquiry and an agent of democracy, advocates the pursuit of “civic journalism”. David Weaver (1998) observes only two imperatives on journalists globally: be quick and protect confidential sources. Having surveyed journalism practice internationally, Weaver concludes that lying, cheating, stealing and false pretences are all acceptable somewhere or other at some time or other. Personally, he maintains that global standards for good journalism exist. His work, however, shows the plurality of those standards.

Goodness, beauty and truth might be universally valued and valuable but they are neither constant over time nor uniform across the globe. Goodness and truth, like beauty, are in the eyes of beholders. Absolutes are hard to find. Plurality prevails. All of which makes the issue of values difficult for media practitioners, including journalists, and media educators, including academics. All generally eschew the “whatever it takes” answer to questions of scruple, whatever they might actually do. They wish to know – and to do – what is legal, what is moral and what is ethical, albeit that those things elude definition, uniformity and universal standardisation.

Of ethics, morals and law, the law is the easiest to understand – if not always to accept or obey. Law stipulates and codifies – generally “in black and white” – what people may or may not do, the penalties payable for any breach and how those breaches are to be tried and proven. Morals are more difficult. They reflect popular beliefs on what is right or wrong. In the vernacular, “50 million Frenchman can be wrong”. The majority is not always right. Nor are its views fixed or constant. Ethics are harder still. Despite being fashionable, written and retrievable codes of ethics are really kinds of legislation and regulation. Ethics are personal and unwritten. They may apply to, and seek to protect, the greater good of humanity but they boil down to individual belief systems that we embrace and rely on in the absence of morals and the law.

The elusive nature of values is perhaps cultural. Culture after all, like personality, is a measure of the way people respond to their environments. Our individual responses constitute our personalities; our collective responses our cultures. And cultures differ from place to place and time to time, often including a diversity of individuals. What they share collectively is their diversity.

Little wonder, however, that debates (such as that on Cultural Diversity at UNESCO in October 2005) are so often spoiled by extravagant claims of what it means to be “truly” this or that or a refusal to recognise that cultural diversity is as vital within as it is among cultures. In mathematics, real spheres, circles and cones are nowhere as smooth and regular – or lines as straight – as the idealised abstract. Indonesia, India, Italy and Ireland are, likewise, all democracies. Government in each is, to quote Abraham Lincoln, “of the people, for the people, by the people”. Yet, electorally, administratively and in parliament each does things differently. Nor is any of them identical to the UK or the USA. One can only wonder what democracy would look like – indeed whether it might already exist - in Iran or Iraq.

Democracy in the 21st century has become not only valuable but fashionable. Yet, it is a recent invention. Those who hark back to the French Revolution or Ancient Greece forget that the “free men of Athens” were only men, not women or children, immigrants or slaves. In Australia, manhood suffrage was only introduced in
Victoria in 1857 and a vote for women in South Australia in 1894. Even 60 years ago, when the United Nations was founded, it had many fewer than its current 200 member states and even fewer democracies among them. Most of its early members were either still colonists or had recently been colonies. As Dr Mahatir, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, observed several years ago, had they been independent and free at the time, many current members would not have supported the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) with its apparently contradictory Articles 19 (on individuals’ right to free expression) and 29 (on their responsibilities to society). Singapore’s long-serving first Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew, even argued that democracy was not an end in itself but a means to the end of “a better life” for his people. Restricting their rights to say and do whatever they might wish is a small price to pay, he said, for their people’s health, wealth and happiness.

Malaysia and Singapore won their independence from the British as part of a Malayan federation, in defiance of both Indonesia and an armed insurgency. In 1965, after bloody strife in the streets, they separated. Each adopted national security legislation left by the departing British and used that, together with personal defamation law and judicious media ownership to bring the press and broadcasting to heel. The majority in each country has accepted its media policy to be “in the national interest” (Gunaratne, 1999).

When Seibert and his colleagues in the USA, 50 years ago, formulated their “four theories of the press”, they classified them according to the political systems of their host countries. Marx, Lenin and Mao Zedong had seen the media as “the sharp end” of public policy. The ruling party would decide and the media would tell the people who they were and what they stood for. In the US, the media were owned and operated, almost exclusively, by “private enterprise”.

In Europe, by contrast, press and broadcasting organisations were owned and operated by religious denominations, unions and political parties. Elsewhere in the developed world there were mixed economies of publicly and privately owned media variously organised to protect their independence from government and corporate control, although that independence was complicated as the media grew into major corporations. In the developing world, where newly independent, post-colonial states are seen to embody the values and aspirations of their people, the media have frequently been owned and operated by government rather than independently of it.

Being operated by public servants keen to please their political masters rather than professionals keen to serve their publics, public service media in developing countries are more often properly seen as “government media”. Whether this is a “good thing” or not provokes debate. Commercial media must maintain a large enough audience to remain viable economically.

Revisiting “the four theories”, Nordenstreng (1997) concluded that they were really only four expressions of the one theory. All media, he said, depend on the social and political milieu in which they operate. They might collaborate with the system to deliver goals such as health, education, welfare and security; they might keep the system under surveillance to maintain its honesty and its probity; they might facilitate its operation by informing the population of what it is doing, or step outside the system and become a more adversarial and radical critic. Whatever choice the media might prefer, they remain constrained by the system. Whatever their other values, the
media rely on their flexibility and their ingenuity, as do their individual practitioners. For Polly Toynbee (2003) in the UK, journalism should portray “what life is really like” and journalists who are embarrassed by what they have to do might better work in PR.

When, as it did in 2004, China considered deregulating its media, it had to balance the financial benefits of private enterprise against the political challenge from independent media. And its journalists and broadcasters had to decide between values of individual responsibility and freedom and the relative merits of state control of the media and media control of the state.

The extensive and pervasive nature of the technology available to the media worldwide, and its convergence, makes it tempting to contemplate globalisation in this field. The experience of international newspaper publishers and global television broadcasters is, however, otherwise. All are beholden to the cultures of their readers, listeners and viewers. Syndicated content is viable only when it appeals to, and resonates with, the values of local audiences. When the media fail to entertain – that is woo and win – the public’s attention, they generally languish, neglected and ignored.

Paul Kelly, former editor of *The Australian*, has been widely critical of the media’s failure to engage their publics. Had they done so, he argues, Australia would (as the media predicted) be a republic, reconciled with its indigenous people and itself. He also argues (*The Australian*, 5 Oct 2005) the need for “a unique Australian perspective… separate from the US-led war on terror”. He believes that the media can (and should) shape society. Janet Albrechtsen, also in *The Australian* (5 Oct 2005), meanwhile, questions the independence and objectivity of “the professional women in academe who research child care and those in the media who write up their research”. Where Kelly values engagement, she prefers detachment.

All these conflicting values came to mind for me in the week before Christmas at a consultation convened by UNESCO in Paris to discuss whether a model curriculum for journalists could be designed and used worldwide. The meeting comprised the editor of *The Hindu* in Chennai, Indians from Singapore and New York, a South African, three other North Americans including a Brazilian from Texas, a Canadian from Florida and another South African from Canada, a Finn, a Moroccan, the head of training from *Al Jazeera*, two women professors – one from Paris and one from Beirut – a Dane, a Bulgarian and two Australians. Guy Berger (2005) from South Africa, wondered if we were united by our displacement and our being refugees. I was confirmed in the value I place on a professional education for the media that provides three kinds of knowledge in three domains:

- a knowledge of what the media are and how they work, not least how to tell stories, be they factual or fictional, in words or sounds or pictures or some combination of those forms;
- a knowledge of the contexts in which they will work, industrially, politically, economically, socially and culturally, especially including the desires and demands of their readers, listeners and viewers, and
- a substantial knowledge of something else, particularly the content of the material that they might report, discuss or dramatise.
We all know people who know what to do and how to do it but don’t. In all these areas, students need to learn that this or that is true, how various things work and are done and (most important of all) the capability to do them.

Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia University in New York (2003), insists that journalism students need education rather than training. All professionals rely not only on high levels of skill, knowledge and public trust but on an ability to address the unknown. Journalists, in whatever medium they work – and that now extends to include film, broadcasting, the Internet and mobile telephony as well as print, not to mention the generic range from sport, travel and lifestyle through science, technology, business and environment to literature, music and art - need to know more about their subject than they can elicit from their research. The value of their work is not just in its content, but in how that content is obtained, treated and presented. Infatuations aside, they need to know how to check the provenance as well as the accuracy of what they find on the Web. Stylistic novelty, too, and aesthetics such as elegance are as important as accuracy.

As Polly Toynbee argued, journalism is about doing good and doing it well. It’s just that much depends on the context in which people work and, what is good for the goose is not always good for the gander.

References

Polly Toynbee (2003) interviewed by Matt Born in ““Most of what is called journalism is really lousy: Polly Toynbee’s views on today’s papers” in *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 14 February, p. 20

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Issue No.16, Dec. 2005