

A UNESCO / UOM initiative



ETHICAL JOURNALISM & GENDER-SENSITIVE REPORTING

Edited by
Christina Chan-Meetoo



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&
GENDER-SENSITIVE
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FOREWORD

This book aims to help journalists navigate the difficult issues which they continuously face in the exercise of their profession, issues which are essential in defining the contours of the media's role in a democratic society. In a world full of contradictions and moral dilemmas, journalism still has a very important place despite all the claims about its impending doom. More than ever, it needs to show that it has the correct moral compass to live up to its public mission of watchdog, an intellectual force which also purports to shape public opinion and enlighten the masses.

The first sections of this book are thus devoted to issues related to ethics in journalism with an assessment of the situation and a model to be examined for industry self-regulation.

In the last sections, we take a look at the importance of gender-sensitive reporting as part of an ethical approach for the media. Indeed, we believe that the media has the moral duty to significantly help in mitigating gender discriminations both within the content it churns out and within its own internal structures. A Gender Code of Ethics for the Media is in fact being proposed for adoption by all media houses in the last chapter of this book.

To a large extent, this publication is inspired by the two workshops which were conducted in Mauritius in October 2012. These workshops and this book would not have been possible were it not for the support of the UNESCO agency IPDC (International Programme for the Development

of Communication) and of the University of Mauritius. Our sincere gratitude goes to both institutions.

Our sincere thanks go to Al-Amin Yusuph from the Dar-es-Salaam office for supporting the initiative. Many thanks also to Deepa Gokulsing for her tremendous help in organising the workshops and to Ramola Ramtohul for her useful assistance.

On a final note, this book is intended to be a reference for journalists in Mauritius and Seychelles. It is being distributed freely to media houses and reporters as a tool to help them elevate the status of journalism and contribute to enforcing democracy for the people.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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ETHICS IN JOURNALISM: WHY AND HOW?

Christina Chan-Meetoo

“[...] mass communication is central in a democracy and in the processes of a democracy” (Fourie, 2001)

We now live and interact in a highly mediated system. The sheer amount of information produced and distributed by the mass media on a daily basis can impact significantly on the manner in which people, communities and societies understand (or misunderstand) each other. Whether it is considered as a fourth estate, a watchdog or a pillar of democracy, the press is undoubtedly an essential element of the public sphere.

However, it continuously faces several challenges and is assailed by multiple forces. Indeed, competition on the digital front, pressures to publish fast and quick, the temptation of sensationalism, job insecurity and high staff turnover are some of the threats to the profession. The constraints abound both on the internal front (search for new revenue models, unstable recruitment and training, lack of professionalisation, conflicts of interest, ownership issues, etc.) and on the external front (government pressure, economic pressure, competition, public scrutiny, etc.).

With so many constraints, how can the news media live up to the expectations of its ever more demanding audience? As the need to

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demonstrate that the public can continue to believe and trust in it is more acute than ever in the age of digital openness and scrutiny, we are inevitably led back to the fundamentals of journalism. Indeed journalism must not only aim to be intrinsically truthful and honest, but also needs to actively prove its worth in the public sphere. In other words, it must demonstrate that it has a solid sense of ethics.

It is a fact that once information has found its way into the public space, it is difficult to take it back. Therefore it is imperative that those who are in the industry of information and news production are armed with the necessary skills and mechanisms to process, report and represent information along ethical lines. It must be emphasised from the onset that ethics is not the law but that its use and application help enhance the quality of journalism and push for greater responsible reporting.

A workshop on ethics in the practice of journalism was held in October 2012 in Mauritius with participants from Seychelles and Mauritius. It aimed at providing media practitioners with the necessary tools for reflecting on their trade and for ensuring that ethical considerations are always top of the agenda in the newsroom, for a healthier public sphere where accusations of unethical reporting are mitigated (and consequently attacks to freedom of the press may not be justified).

Indeed, the local media in Mauritius are often accused by political stakeholders of being biased and unprofessional. Governments conveniently use these arguments to brandish the threat of state regulation and tougher media laws. The present government regularly evokes the setting up of a Media Commission and has appointed Geoffrey Robertson QC to draft new media laws. Whilst it is true that there are many cases of unethical reporting, direct government intervention and control is certainly not warranted. This would undoubtedly represent a threat to freedom of expression and democracy in a small highly politicised country like ours. The government appointed consultant himself does not seem to be in favour of such drastic measures to address the problem. At his last conference in Mauritius in May 2012, Robertson pleaded for self-regulation and even stated that freedom of information legislation is needed in Mauritius.

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It should here be noted that the preliminary report ‘Media Law and Ethics in Mauritius’ was presented in April 2013 by Geoffrey Robertson QC. The main proposals concerned the setting up of an Ombudsman’s office, the review of defamation and sedition laws, as well as the introduction of Freedom of Information legislation.

As for Seychelles, the situation is somewhat different as it has a Media Commission since 2010. This Media Commission was set up by the National Assembly and all its members nominated by the President. As it is a rather young institution, it is difficult to say whether it is acting in a totally neutral and independent manner from government.

The problem is that, upon hearing the word “ethics”, people shudder as they think it is too grand and automatically associate it with moral eugenics and conformism. While the risk exists that codes of ethics could lead to the temptation of excessive highbrow morality, this is still not a sufficient argument to simply not have any framework for a common agreement as to what is acceptable or not in the way news are sourced, treated and put into the public arena. The possible negative consequences of decisions made by news people cannot simply be overlooked and brushed aside. Just as the news media expects the other three estates (i.e. the legislative, the judiciary and the executive) to be subjected to scrutiny in the interest of the public they are supposed to serve, similarly the so-called fourth estate (i.e. the press) should also naturally agree to such scrutiny.

However, many have tried to confine ethics to the boundaries of the individual and the personal, arguing that it cannot come from without, that it cannot be imposed. The voluntary dimension of ethical practice is indeed an essential component from an ideal standpoint. However, as history has proved that leaving news media to their own devices is not a good idea, most democratic countries have adopted some form of regulation framework, ranging from statutory regulation (imposed by law) to independent self-regulation by the industry (without any state intervention). It should be noted here that state-controlled statutory regulation is not considered as desirable for the written press in most

stable democracies (as opposed to broadcasting which is historically subjected to stricter regulation).

There are of course a variety of possible forms and structures for self-regulation as set out by Johan Retief (Press Ombudsman at Print Media South Africa) in the following sections. Such types of regulation are effected through well-defined and recognised instruments like codes of ethics and conduct, press councils and ombuds offices.

In Mauritius, there is neither direct state regulation nor any established and recognised self-regulation of the written press. Instead, there is currently regulation through harsh criminal laws inherited from the colonial times; laws relating to sedition, public offence, defamation, libel, false news... These are more often used by politicians than any other category of the public and are thus clearly not suitable for the protection of the mass, for people who are unable or unwilling to go to court as the legal route is generally too time-consuming, costly and complex.

We must recognise that there have been some attempts for self-regulation through the creation of codes of ethics and conduct within some news desks as well as some associations such as the defunct *Association des Journalistes Mauriciens* and the stillborn *Newspapers Editors and Publishers Association*. The issue is that few journalists seem to know the content of the above codes and obviously very few actively refer to such codes in their daily practice. More importantly, there is very little awareness among the public of the existence of such codes and thus limited possibility to interpellate the press for any breach to their own code of ethics.

One noteworthy attempt was made by the press company La Sentinelle in 2008 to set up an ethics committee comprising of an academic, a retired judge and a retired civil servant to adjudicate on complaints for non-compliance with their code. But, the effort was short-lived and showed limited transparency and results.

Though laudable, such segregated attempts to establish and promote ethical practice in journalism are clearly not sufficient.

In any case, the mere existence of one particular instrument will not necessarily lead to a totally ethical press. Codes of ethics or codes of conduct without any mechanism for monitoring and accountability do not serve any real purpose as acknowledged by Mauritian journalists themselves in a survey on ethics in journalism. 82% of the respondents believe that the profession needs a unique code and 56% think that an industry-wide regulatory mechanism is needed to impose that code.

Survey on ethics in journalism

The survey was carried out online in March 2013 with journalists and editors-in-chief in Mauritius to gauge their appreciation of ethical levels in their own profession. The qualitative method was chosen in order to allow the respondents to express their views in an elaborate manner. 34 persons from a diversity of media houses and beats responded to the online questionnaire. The anonymity of respondents was guaranteed.

From responses to the survey, there are multiple issues which need to be addressed, namely, the treatment of sordid news, the protection of children and of rape victims, conflicts of interest, publication without verification, biased coverage, separation of facts from opinion and ethnic hatred inter alia.

Where they work:

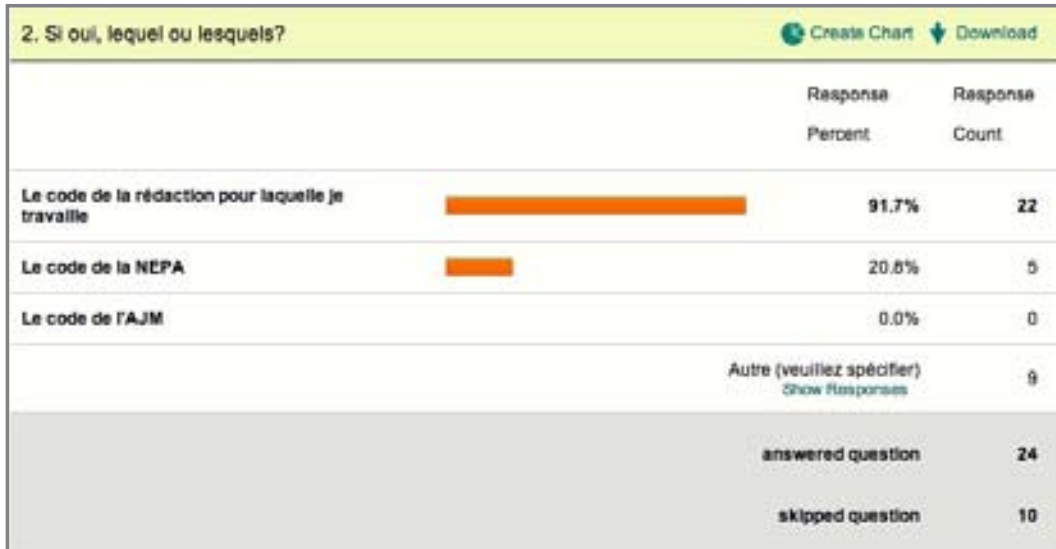
- Private radio stations
- Public radio and TV station (MBC)
- Leading dailies
- Leading weeklies
- Specialised weeklies
- Alternative media
- Experienced former journalists

Use of codes

85% of the journalists who responded claimed that they do use a code of ethics. A majority of those stated that they use a code from their

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own newsdesks. 5 out of 34 journalists stated that they use the NEPA code. One stated that (s)he does not use a code of ethics and instead has recourse to legal advice on a regular basis.



Code of ethics used by journalists



Usefulness of existing codes of ethics

Only 33% of the journalists feel that the existing codes of ethics or conduct are effectively used by journalists. Most believe that the codes attracted attention on launch but were quickly forgotten as there is no mechanism for monitoring and application (53%). A few (17%) even agreed with the statement that the codes were launched for the show and were never meant to serve any real purpose.

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Responses (5)	Text Analysis	My Categories (0)
Showing 5 text responses		No responses selected
Servent de texte de référence qu'en cas de questions particulièrement compliquées. 4/2/2013 11:19 PM View Responses		
Ne sont pas bien connus ni vulgarisés 4/2/2013 8:20 PM View Responses		
Non par réaction a un événement, et non par souci de professionnalisme, et donc pour se donner bonne conscience. Mais bien, les habitudes ont repris leur cours. 4/2/2013 1:02 PM View Responses		
Tout dépend du niveau de sérieux et professionnalisme des journalistes individuellement. Certains s'y réfèrent systématiquement. D'autres consentent parfois à "oublier" les règles soit par convenance ou à cause de la pression de leurs responsables et/ou direction. 3/29/2013 4:27 PM View Responses		
Ils n'ont jamais été testés et ne sont donc pas efficaces et en plus il n'y a aucune instance pour les faire appliquer donc c'est une intention incomplète. 3/29/2013 8:04 AM View Responses		

Usefulness of existing codes of ethics



Opinion on level of ethics in journalism

Not a single respondent believes that the level of ethics in journalism in Mauritius is excellent but most feel that it is acceptable (46%) and good (18%). 36% feel the level is bad, even mediocre.

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Ethical issues faced by journalists

When asked about personal experience with ethical issues, half of the respondents stated that they have either witnessed or been personally confronted with incidents involving an ethical dimension. One stated that (s)he currently has a case in court without providing further information about the case.

A few were very critical of their own news organisations which encourage unethical behaviour to provide sensationalist content so as to sell more papers, indulge in disinformation and publish unverified information. Some cited the influence of the newspaper's corporate owners who tried to mitigate coverage of scandals linked to their banking activity, linkages of news editors to some harmful organisations or external pressure to refrain from covering sensitive news about powerful political figures. Other ethical dilemmas concerned PR gifts, offer of rewards from those whose lives had been changed after positive coverage and requests to view texts before publication. The case of the MBC was also evoked with its completely partisan coverage of parliamentary debates and cover up of scandals involving political figures.

Their views on ethics in journalism in Mauritius

Most journalists feel that there is lack of objectivity in the profession (44%), especially in propagandist media organs associated with the ruling party but also within more so-called independent publications and radio stations which do not always separate fact from opinion and even indulge in partisan coverage of political events and issues. Many are also shocked by the sensationalist coverage of crime and sex stories, specially the use of explicit headlines and pictures involving sexual aggression (32%) and the publication of crude photos of cadavers and accidents (32%). 12% are disturbed by coverage which involves innocent minors who are identified by name or photography. Other cases evoked include the publication of unverified information, irresponsible journalism inciting people to break the law and recording without permission.

The majority of respondents believe that a unique code ethics is very important for the whole profession in Mauritius (82%) with 56% stating

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that there should also be a single regulation agency such as a press council or ombuds office. A few believe that internal mechanisms for each media house (such as a committee or ombudsperson) would be sufficient (21%). Only five journalists believe that ethics cannot be codified and two journalists stated that there should be regulation by a state agency.



Need for a unique code of ethics in journalism



Need for a single regulation framework