Universal and Parochial Influences on Journalistic Ethics

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Synopsis

Studies on communication ethics are riddled with complexities that are due in large part to the fact that the concept of ethics is very often viewed as subjective. This subjective nature of ethics stem from the fact that ethical considerations and decisions are made based not just on personal moral inclinations, but also a host of other factors of a socio- cultural and political nature.

If communication within cultures is already complex, then the complexities in communication across cultures would be magnified. This is because of the different values and beliefs that individuals hold that influence their ethical orientations. Communication ethics thus far has been dominated by Western values that have been taken as universal principles and thereby emulated by other developing countries. However, these principles may or may not be relevant or acceptable in these societies.

This essay advocates a shift in the communication paradigm from the 'universal' to the 'native' or 'parochial'. The unique characteristics of each individual culture have to be first understood to get a better insight into the influences on ethical communication. Where ethics from the Western perspective emphasizes 'individual autonomy', ethics from the Malaysian perspective puts great stock on socio-cultural and political influences.

Introduction

"What is ethical to you may not be ethical to me".
The statement above and others to that effect are regularly heard when one talks bout ethics in general or communication ethics in particular. Herein lies the problem of studying ethics -ethical considerations and decisions are made based not just on personal and moral

inclinations, but also on a host of other factors of a socio-cultural and political nature. Discussions and research on ethics are usually not conclusive due to the different values and interpretations that people have which influence ethical decision-making. The difficulty in studying ethics stems from the premise from which ethics has thus far been viewed. Even though the concern for ethics in the public sphere has been developed since thousands of years ago, the Western moral-philosophical perspective has always dominated the ethics discourse. This viewpoint, which is characterized by ethical theories and philosophies in the likes of Aristotle (The Golden Mean), Immanuel Kant (Categorical Imperative), John Stuart Mill (The Principle of Utility or Consequentialist Theory), John Rawl (Veil of Ignorance), emphasizes the 'autonomous self to take a virtuous action and make ethical decisions through free choice.

The moral-philosophical viewpoint in the study of media ethics, however, is insufficient to give a holistic examination of the sources of ethics. It is more appropriate and relevant to the libertarian tradition of communication where press freedom is one of the virtues of the profession. The Western ethics framework is inadequate to uncover the realities of the communication profession found in other media systems and structures.

Delving into the socio-cultural and political environment in which a media system operates is thus paramount to get a more holistic view of the different influences on ethics. Studying these factors acknowledges the fact that virtually all cultures have their own tradition of norms and values that guide communication behavior in a society. This thesis emphasizes that because ethics is based on the concept of 'right' and 'wrong' and very much dependent on individual interpretation, one is compelled to examine the cultural system of particular cultures that give rise to right or wrong interpretations.

White (1989) advocates that to understand the influences on communication ethics, it is imperative to study sociological features like the "professional ethos" and the "public philosophy" which would provide an insight into the socio-political context of communication. This entails 'going into' a culture to understand the perception of the actors in that culture. For example, to understand the libertarian tradition of media ethics, one has to 'go into' the social and political system to understand that the ethos of media professionals is characterized by individualism (among others). Comparatively, in other societies with a more cultural-political control, there is a stronger sense of obligation to the polity and cultural heritage.

A review of the scholarship on media ethics reveals numerous examples to show the influence of political and social forces on ethical decision-making. Cooper et al's (1989) book on media ethics in the different social contexts of countries in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and South America, for example, is seminal and useful in understanding the philosophies, ideologies and the concepts of freedom and responsibility in different social structures. To take a leaf out of the book, Nigeria is a fitting example of a society whose social interactions are very much influenced by cultural norms. For instance, there are various systems of supernatural resources to ensure justice, fair play, honesty and truth in communication. One of the most important ethics of journalism is ethnicity where the news

value of any event can be changed by the ethical consideration of how one's ethnic group is affected by media coverage of such an event (Okigbo, 1989).

Christians (1989) calls the different influences on media ethics as a "hierarchy of loyalties" that the media people have to carry in their daily routine. These loyalties include obligations to the government/country, to employers, to society, to religious and cultural beliefs -and the ranking of this hierarchy varies from person to person, from issue to issue and from organization to organization. The Malaysian media structure is an apt example of a media system that faces this hierarchy of loyalties – to the political masters, to the cultural sensitivities and to the media organization's own aspirations. Studying and viewing ethics in its indigenous environment will elicit the real meaning of ethics and the influences on it.

Ethical Standards: Universal or Parochial?

It cannot be denied that human values and concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' are universal because almost all major religions and human civilization advocate a value system that distinguishes between 'good' or 'bad'. Universal ethical standards (for the media per se) include press freedom, objectivity, truth, fairness, respect for others' privacy, confidentiality of sources, etc. These principles are commonly found in the codes of ethics of almost all media organizations around the world. To a certain extent, this 'common-ness' in ethical principles is largely due to the fact that while many developing media systems were formulating their code of ethics, the codes of the more developed media systems (i.e. the United States and United Kingdom), were used as guidelines. Thus, the same principles were duplicated and perpetuated in the media codes across the world (but of course one should not overlook the fact that many of the principles are common because they are universal).

Over the years, however, some of these universals were realized to have gone against the political and social grain of the countries, thus triggering debate on the utility and practicality of adopting ethical standards of media organizations that function in a libertarian tradition. Realizing the shortcoming of the Western media codes, some countries have reformulated their codes to reflect more of the unique characteristics of their societies (for example, the 1972 Malaysia National Union of Journalists Code of Ethics is complemented by a much-improved 1989 Canons of Journalism). While at one level there are universal ethical principles among communicators, there are also ethical differences among communicators of different national, cultural, political and religious backgrounds. Cooper et al (1989) hypothesized that "beneath such seeming universals are unique differences".

To illustrate the above point, media codes that advocate 'truth', 'freedom' and 'responsibility' in the United Kingdom (the National Union of Journalists), the United States of America (the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi), Malaysia (Canons of Journalism) and Indonesia (Journalism Code of Ethics), for instance, would have vastly

different contexts surrounding these words. The statements on freedom, truth and responsibility in the codes of these four countries suggest that though the principles are universal, they be defined by the specific characteristics of the different societies. The statements in the UK and the US are defined by a. personal and organizational freedom, and b. national interests. On the other hand, the statements in the Malaysian and Indonesian codes, though they are similar in that the overriding mission of the media is to make the public know of events important and of interest to it, this mission and responsibility is tempered with and defined by considerations for the sensitivities of the different cultures and religions co-existing in the society.

The theme on media ethics advocated in this essay is that it is imperative to understand that a society has its own parochial values to serve its people for its own purposes (Gerbner, 1989). This framework complements the dominant Western concept of viewing ethics as the 'right' of the individual to be ethical or not; and the widely accepted assumption that ethical standards are universal. In the Malaysian context, this individual right is not always apparent or clear-cut, instead the media people encounter conflicting pressures and loyalties that take the 'individual autonomy' out of their hands. The study of ethics, therefore, cannot be viewed 'universally', but instead a 'native' perspective should be taken on board to understand ethics in the Malaysian environment.

Ethical Standards: A Case Study of Two Malaysian Newspapers

To get a better insight into how universal ethical standards can sometimes come into conflict with ethical practices of individual societies, a discussion of some of the ethical principles are in order. The data discussed here was collected during this writer's doctoral research in 1995 on the influences on the practice of ethical journalism in Malaysia. The research was conducted on two newspapers-the New Straits Times (NST) and Utusan Malaysia. To get a feel of the ethical practice in Malaysia, the following is a discussion of a couple of universal ethical principles commonly emphasized in journalistic practices:

1. The principle of truth telling: This principle is characterized by concepts like accuracy, objectivity, and fairness in news gathering and writing process. For instance, the American Society of Newspaper Editors Code of Ethics stipulates that "every effort must be made to ensure that new content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly". Though several have pointed to the fact that such abstract concepts are difficult to analyze (e.g. Day, 1991, Hackett, 1985, Hall et al, 1976) news workers are still expected to achieve accuracy, fairness and objectivity in their writings. Perhaps an interview with a senior manager of NST offers the best illustration to show how objectivity is viewed in the Malaysian context:

    Nobody can really define balance (the interviewee used 'balance' as a synonym to 'objectivity ').

What constitutes balance? Do you mean to say that if I give 20 words to the Prime Minister, I must also give 20 words to the opposition? It may be balanced by way of word count, but is it balanced by way of power that the two men (referring to the Prime Minister and an opposition party leader) have over the country? The Prime Minister may not feel it is fair to give him 20 words and to the opposition 20 words when he controls 70 per cent of the popular votes and the opposition controls only 30 per cent of the popular votes.

This sentiment is then manifested in the way NST and Utusan function where government-related news is extensively covered in the media, while news on the opposition is not the order of the day. By any Western standard, this practice would be described as a violation of press freedom and freedom of expression where access has to be given to all voices in the society and where the press functions as forum for such voices to be heard. NST and Utusan, however, legitimize their working-in-tandem-with-the-government stance by rationalizing that since the people put the government into power, the press should work with the government for the betterment of the people. Too much dissenting voice could retard this process of development.

Thus, even a universal principle like 'objectivity' has to look to the wider social, political and cultural environment and context for a more appropriate definition and interpretation. Every social context presents its own realities that should not be ignored if reality about a culture is to be obtained.

2. The principle of stewardship: Central to the principle of stewardship is the concept of social responsibility where a journalist takes into account the rights of others, the rights of the public and the moral health of the journalism profession. The Commission for a Free and Responsibility Press, the Hutchins Commission, 1947, developed the idea of social responsibility with the following requirements:

i. A truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning.

ii. A forum for the exchange of comment and criticism.

iii. Vigorous editorial leadership, by presenting and clarifying the goals and values of society.

iv. Full access to the day's intelligence.

In Malaysia, the principle of stewardship is not viewed in the same context as that of the West. Where in the West, this principle means safeguarding freedom of the press from internal and external pressures (and making the media play an adversarial role), in Malaysia this freedom includes undertaking a social responsibility concept. This sees the media working hand in hand with the government and other social forces for the betterment of the society. Though the media do play a watchdog role, they would simultaneously not hesitate to work with the government whenever the need arises.

This is the Malaysian definition of the principle of stewardship. Considerations for the state and the society at times override other considerations like journalism professionalism. A senior editor of Utusan summed up the roles of the media as follows:

Why should we be anti-establishment? We have a government which is forward-looking, which has a vision, which does not want any racial riot like what is happening in so many other countries why can't we be tools of the government when we have a government that wants to eradicate poverty. ..?

Social-Cultural and Political Influences on Journalistic Ethics

The two ethical principles above were quoted to show how even universal principles have to be appropriated to the local environment. Universal ethical principles which have been accepted as guidelines in media codes world-wide are not necessarily acceptable and applicable in a media environment like Malaysia which is steeped in socio-cultural and political influences.

The ethical standards in the Malaysian mass media scenario are influenced by the values and norms embraced from an early age. A simple example of this is the difference in the manner journalists ask questions: the Malaysia news workers said that while their Western counterparts use the "direct and attack" approach, they are more "gentle" in their mannerisms. An Utusan reporter who was a correspondent in Indonesia for a few years narrated the manner some Indonesian reporters (and this is also true for many Malaysian reporters) asked questions: they would start with "Sir, I am sorry, I would like to ask you this..." Such respect and humility is no longer common in the journalism profession.

Malaysia has a system of ethical code called adat (customs) which dictates how social interactions are to be conducted. The adat is a "comprehensive and rather formidable code of behavior and form of decency" (Mahathir, 1970). Both the adat and Islamic principles are said to be the strongest influences on the Malay value system and ethical code. These form the premise that guide or determines social conduct and interactions.

The adat, for instance, puts great stock in formality and rituals that rate very high in the Malay concept of values. To depart from this formality and rituals is considered unbecoming and rude; for example, the elders, the learned and the leaders are accorded great respect in society. There is an aversion and unwillingness to embarrass or have an open confrontation with these groups in particular and other members of the society in general.

Two common social values that Malaysians hold are respecting peoples' privacy (and thus abhorring exposing their weaknesses in public) and not "'hurting people's feelings directly in public~. This would explain why they are not open in their criticisms or why criticisms are not done openly, and especially not in the media. Though reporters do criticize, the manner in which this is done is not similar to that of the Western journalistic practice where the direct approach is much preferred. In Malaysia, writing indirectly and reading between the lines has become a cultural skill in communication. In the Malay culture, verbal contradiction is unseemly and distasteful; much meaning in stories is revealed by insinuation and implication (McDaniel, 1994). An Utusan senior reporter said:

We do not criticize people openly. Being a journalist in Malaysia, you have to be skilful in reading between the lines and in not criticizing people openly. I think culture and religion stop people from being unethical. Ethical principles may be the same everywhere, but how one exercises these principles would be influenced by culture.

The unwillingness to embarrass people publicly is one of the religious norms or one of the adat that form social boundaries where public morals are maintained. This is the ethical guideline of the journalism profession in Malaysia. Mahathir (1970) summed up the disposition of the Malays as such:

There is always a proper way to do things and it is not expected that there should be a logical explanation of why the prescribed way is correct and acceptable.

However, following political and social agitation in 1998, this disposition of the Malays underwent a change. If yesterday the society was not comfortable with openly and directly criticizing people with social status and authority, the society today has to a certain extent, evolved into a more politically and culturally vibrant and interactive generation. This has become apparent in the way criticisms are meted out openly towardthe status quo. Nevertheless, though the alternative media have undertaken this stance, the mainstream media still remain largely pro-establishment.

Another factor that plays an important role in influencing the ethical orientation of news workers is Malaysia's plural society with its multi-racial and multi-religious structure. News workers are constantly mindful of this social fabric and the sensitivities of the various groups. In fact, certain sensitivities are written into the Federal Constitution as subjects that could not be discussed in the public arena. Article 10 of the Constitution which concerns freedom of speech prohibits the discussions of four issues deemed 'sensitive': a) the Malay language as the national language, b) citizenship rules and policy, c) the special position of the Malays and the legitimate interests of other communities, and d) the sovereignty of the rulers. News workers are cautious about reporting on issues and events with racial and religious connotations, at times deciding instead to use caution rather than producing reports that could fan racial sentiments.

The former Group Editor of NST, Datuk Kadir Jasin, believes that taking the multi-racial and multi-religious society into consideration would compel a reporter to be responsible and ethical:

We are living in a multi-racial society. I think it is not ethical for me to continue to portray the Malays as lazy, the Chinese as being greedy or prone to gangsterism or triad, or the Indians as being quarrelsome; this is racial stereotyping. I think this constitutes ethics. Ethics has to start with responsibility and this responsibility has to be defined in the context of the society where you operate.

Former Group Editor of Utusan, Datuk Johan Jaafar, summed up the social responsibility of the media when he said that this is the "Malaysian experience" and the "Malaysian context" where the society is one of the underpinning factors that affects ethical decision-making. Media workers are made aware of this feature of the Malaysian media, particularly through newsroom socialization.

Conclusion

Journalism practices across different societies do share certain universal characteristics. Nevertheless, beyond these commonalties, other characteristics and attributes of journalism are context-bound (Ebo, 1994). To ignore the significant role that indigenous political, social and cultural factors play in the shaping of media products will not give an accurate account of the mass media.

Several Asian political leaders have often talked about "Asian values" as an approach to understanding media philosophy in the Asian region. Though this concept began as a political slogan by these leaders when debating the issue of press freedom, it is in itself misleading. Asia's vast territorial span results in inhomogenuity in the practices of values among Asian countries (just as the concept of the Western values too is not clear-cut due to the different countries and cultures that make up the Western world). Because each country has its own values and norms, there can never be truly "Asian values".

Nevertheless, despite the lack of consensus and to a certain extent, a lack of acceptance of this concept (some opinions criticized this concept as being part of the rhetoric and an attempt by governments that seek to perpetuate themselves in power by restricting the press and other civil liberties), it should be seen as a foundation to show the difference in the media philosophy between the West and the East. The major religious traditions (like Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) stand for a holistic vision of life and society encompassing economic, political and social dimensions as opposed to the partialistic and fragmentary approaches to development (as seen in the West). The Asian news people have to find a middle ground between the Western paradigm of press freedom, which in certain countries border on the unconstrained, and carrying developmental journalism to its extreme, to the extent that even mild criticisms of the ruling elite and a critical attitude is viewed with suspicion, and sometimes contempt (Anwar, 1994). Asia's complexities and diversities demand diverse and complex media and media methods, apart from or complementing the traditional Western discipline of reporting.

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