

MEDIA ETHICS: A Call to Responsible Journalism

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1.0 Introduction

For many years now, globally, the media has assumed and reinforced its important role as a legitimate reflection of public interest and opinion. Since Edmund Burke's famous remarks made in the House of Commons in England in 1774 in recognition of the important contributions the press made, the place and position of the media in society and governance structure of states continues to be recognized and consolidated as the fourth estate. This is very true of the Malawian media which is fast becoming a strong pillar, catalyst and tool of democracy since 1994 when Malawi re-embraced multi-party democracy with a liberalised, plural media.

The power and apparent influence of the media was long realised time in memorial. All governments since independence, corporate organisations, influential and powerful politicians and individuals have sought ways and means to control and regulate the media not only by wanting to limit its legitimate right to write, broadcast and publish freely but also to possess it, manipulate it, subject it to mere puppets that can be pulled by the string and as we observe today to reduce the media to tools of third grade propaganda.

Luckily, global, regional and local trends in good governance coupled with a Malawian constitution that provides for freedom of expression and above all media institutions that safeguards the freedom of the media through self regulation and advocacy, seem to be working in favour of the media by advancing the principle that a free media is one of the pre-requisites for good governance and a legitimate voice of public opinion and interest. This helps to remind those in power, whatever power, wanting to restrict the media, to be a little restraint for want of a good score on the governance record card.

However, the threat to media freedom seems to be beyond the powers that we know to have an insatiable desire to restrict the media. Malawian journalism, in some of its quarters, plays betrayal.

This presentation discusses what might be a grey area in the Malawian media, the ethical conduct that brings about a responsible and credible media. It explores the

challenges that lie within the media threatening its very fabric of existence, that is, the fundamental principles and values of professionalism and the essential milieu of freedom without which media practice becomes almost impossible. The presentation tries to do so by firstly clarifying the concept of self regulation through a code of conduct or practice; the betrayal of the profession and breach of public trust through unethical and unprofessional conduct in the industry; the need for ethics; challenges to ethical conduct and finally the way to achieving responsible journalism.

2.0 Ethical Conduct a safeguard of Media Freedom

The initiative by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) to facilitate a process of self regulation through a code of practice to guide the conduct of the media during the 2009 general elections lies at the heart of Media Council of Malawi's (MCM) mandate to safeguard media freedom through self regulation. The number one objective of Media Council of Malawi is to defend and safeguard media freedom in Malawi. The establishment of MCM is an initiative to unite media practitioners in their effort to raise professional standards and in that way consolidating the social standing of the media profession. The co-operation among journalists in the field of ethics in this country is also a great training ground for their co-operation in demanding their legitimate rights from the government. Of course quality should never be understood as a pre-requisite for media freedom because it is only a fully free media that can be responsible just like a child who grows to be able to stand on their own learn to be responsible. However, ethical and professional conduct is a safeguard of media freedom and media power.

The formulation of a code of practice by the media usually are welcomed by dissatisfaction from the public that it often lacks teeth with which to bite, meaning that no punitive measures are explicitly stipulated in the code. This may not be true or it may be a misunderstanding of self regulation. While punitive measures and disciplinary actions might be important in enforcing ethical conduct and editorial policies of individual media houses and regulatory bodies, it is important to note that this is not the primary objective of self regulation.

3.0 Defining Self Regulation

Self regulation is about setting minimum standards on ethics so that journalists attain the highest professional standards that enable them become responsible. It is a responsible media that can be trusted by the public and that can make its rightful demands from the government. A media that is characterised by punishments is often viewed negatively as being irresponsible and therefore not credible. Self - regulation helps the media respond to legitimate complaints and therefore correct the errors and mistakes that are a genuine concern of the public. It is a pledge by quality conscious media professionals to conduct themselves professionally and maintain dialogue with the public. This is why, as you will notice, the code of practice has within it a complaint mechanism which is intended to deal with justified concerns in a rational and autonomous way.

However, the trust by the public, the demand for their legitimate right to freedom of expression and information, and the beauty of the profession itself, is often betrayed by media practitioners who operate irresponsibly through clandestine means.

4.0 Media Betrayal

There is betrayal of freedom of the media in Malawi, including the freedom of expression and the public right to freely receive and impart information and opinion and ultimately betrayal of professionalism. Key to this betrayal is the adage: "Who eats ethics?" This is an operating maxim that guides some media practitioners. It is the motto of the antithetical media profession that operates in the opposite direction. It has made media practitioners or industry succumb to various pressures ranging from poor remuneration packages, ambush managers, tight lips, political pressure, commercialism and ownership.

This betrayal of the profession becomes rampant during the critical period of elections when ethical and professional conduct of media professionals becomes crucial for fair and peaceful general elections. If this betrayal, is not dealt with now, it will quickly like a bush fire consume all the good that is left in our media profession and leave it undesirable only to fulfil destructive agendas through callous means for clandestine rewards.

But the question is: How do we stop unethical and unprofessional conduct in the media? In my opinion this is a tall order. However, it is not an insurmountable undertaking. All it requires is commitment to professionalism, passion for the profession where our desire is to bring the best to the public and leave a legacy that will endure for posterity because of the good work that we live behind.

5.0 Why Ethics?

5.1 Social Reasons

Everything that a journalist does has ethical implications, to a lesser or greater extent. This is because everything that a journalist writes or says or neglects to write or to say in some or other way has an influence on people. This influence can be good or bad. Because the media have an enormous influence, it is of vital importance that journalism be practiced in an accountable and responsible way. When the media act irresponsibly several things happen:

1. unnecessary harm is done to people;
2. the media loses credibility;
3. it weakens the media's vital role as watch dogs;
4. the well being of democracy suffers

5.2 Philosophical/Moral

There are two fundamental characteristics of human behaviour: **harm** and **mutual aid**. Ethics and moral behaviour are important because of people's universal aversion to harm either physical or psychological. Harm is the experience of pain, suffering or deprivation against our will that results from the wilful or neglect act of another person. From the moral point of view harm is wrongful injury as a result of human action and should be seen as an aspect of evil. While most, if not all human beings would not want to be harmed, it is true that most human beings inflict harm from time to time on others. The co-existent realities – the universal human aversion to harm and the universal human tendency to inflict harm are the conditions that call ethical practice in the media necessary.

5.3 Professional Reasons

Anyone can write or express their views in any way they want. This is a human right included in the bill of rights. However, professional communication exists among a group of people who are deemed and recognized so. Therefore if journalism is going to be recognized as a profession then it must have ethical standards, professional training that enables a prospective practitioner or professional to acquire a body of theoretical knowledge, a set of skills, cultivate the necessary qualities and finally go through a rigorous process of practical experience or internship before graduation. This is what sets a professional communicator from ordinary communicators. This is the more reason why MEC recruits qualified journalists to cover the electoral process. This training serves as a specialised training for a special process of general elections.

5.4 Media can be a source of conflict

The Media can also be source of conflict through the harm they cause to Society. When media practitioners do their work unprofessionally their products can be potentially harmful to individuals, organizations, societies and the world at large. Harmful media products can incite hatred and violent conflicts, damage people's and organizations reputations, businesses and disrupt social and economic life in general. This is why, although not only for this reason, governments come up with different legislation to protect the public from harmful effects of irresponsible media. There are so many laws such as those against libel, defamation etc. There is a marked difference between ethics and laws. One of the functions of MCM is to ensure that government does not enact laws that repress the media but this is not a licence for the media to be breaking laws that are meant for a just and order society.

6.0 What Are Ethics?

Most scholars define ethics as a branch of philosophy which deals with the study of moral behaviour, its underlying moral principles and rational justification. However, there is a difference between morality and ethics. The Latin word *mores* refers to the customs and conventions that govern the ways people behave while the *ethos* from Greek means character. The following are some definitions:

1. The study of what we ought to do. It has to do with duty. Duty to self and duty to others.
2. Critical reflection on and self-confrontation with the moral choices that arise daily.
3. Rules of conduct or principles of morality that point us towards the right or best way to act in a situation.
4. Ethics are concerned with making rational judgements as well as sound moral decisions in daily journalistic performance

7.0 General Ethical Guidelines

Journalists ought to serve the public with thoroughness by providing them with fact-based and accurate information. True and accurate information helps the public to understand issues and therefore able to develop informed opinions and make informed choices. The following are some of the general ethical issues or guidelines that will help media practitioners provide the public with facts.

7.1 Accuracy

Accuracy firstly involves gathering all the relevant facts. This means that firstly, if a journalist leaves out one important detail of a particular story the story will not be accurate. Secondly, concentrate only on all the relevant facts. Irrelevant facts will not only lack space (newspaper) and time (radio and television) but will also distort the balance that is so important for accurate reporting.

Secondly, accuracy involves verifying and checking your facts thoroughly using more one source. Reporting facts before confirmation is a violation of one of the basic principles of journalism.

Thirdly, put the relevant facts in proper context. This is absolutely important for an accurate story. Changing the context will give an incomplete and therefore inaccurate story. This consequently changes the meaning of the story altogether.

Finally, although this is not all, put your facts in a fair and balanced way. Give the different sides in the story the importance they deserve. Do not exaggerate or give your comments. This is not what readers are looking because they are not interested in your opinion but facts.

7.1.1 Why Inaccurate Reporting must be avoided

1. It can cause irreparable personal harm
2. It prevents the public from making informed decisions on important matters such as voting, investments, shopping etc
3. It affects the media's integrity (what we think of ourselves) as well as their credibility (what the public think about us)

4. The public expects quality work from the media and they have a right to be served by honest journalists. Our readers, listeners and viewers do not only deserve accurate reporting but also pay for it.

7.2 Truth

Truth is the oldest and most highly regarded ethical principle of humankind. It has been the fundamental journalistic value since the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. Philosophers, courts, religious people, teachers and parents value truth.

7.2.1 Why Truth is important?

1. Without the truth a journalist has neither integrity nor credibility
2. Truth demonstrates a respect for people as people (that is dignified human beings) who are not objects of manipulation.
3. It builds relationship of trust between the media and the public

Truth involves basing a story on solid evidence. Any doubt should be disclosed in the story. Accuracy in this case is thus one underlying concept of truth. Another basic concept of the notion of truth is promotion of understanding. A story should contain adequate relevant information to enable the consumer understand the facts as well as the context of the facts. Finally, reporting should be fair and balanced. Avoid biased reporting.

7.3 Balance and Fairness

One of the cardinal rules in journalism is taking cognisance of the fact that there is virtually all the time another side to a story. "A professional journalist therefore, has the obligation to present balanced and comprehensive information. They look not at two but all sides of a subject" (Rioba et al 2002: 42).

7.3.1 What is "fair?"

1. According to the Oxford English Dictionary fairness, among other things means ample, just, equitable, of moderate quality or amount, according to rules, above board, straightforward and equal opportunity.
2. Black et al (1995: 53) defines fairness as the pursuit for truth with both vigour and compassion and providing information without favouritism, self interest or prejudice. According to Black et al, what is required is to be open minded, avoid biased reporting, stereotypical portrayals and unsubstantiated allegations.
3. According to *The Freedom Forum Online*, 16 December 1997), fairness also imply weighing all sides, presenting all sides in a context, looking at least at two sides of an issue .

From the above efforts to define "fair", Retief 2002:86, makes an attempt to define this elusive word and says: "Fairness is firstly an honest attempt to:

- a. To balance your report in such a way that no party is misrepresented either by your choice of words or by the lack of proper context (that would be unjust);
- b. Ensure that all parties get their say (equality)
- c. Give coverage to different parties in relation to their importance (moderation)

7.3.2 Aspects of fairness

1. **The choice of words:** Fairness means choosing your words most appropriately in order to justly reflect and depict the reality that you are reporting on.
2. **The quest for perspective:** You cannot properly communicate a story without putting it into its proper perspective or context.
3. **The Rashomon Effect:** Always bear in mind the fact that each individual has their own (unique) interpretation of the same event. Choosing the account of one witness above the other implies that you have not given your sources equal opportunity to portray the truth. That is unfair.
4. **Balance:** "Fairness means balance. A balanced report is one that looks at all sides to an issue. If one concerned party is overlooked, the report cannot be fair (Retief 2002:84).

7.3.3 Achieving Balance and Fairness

Whenever, you are working on a contentious story such as during elections, you will encounter interested and disgruntled sources. These are individuals, or organisations or parties who are involved in a story and each of them always fight to be in the lime light. Use each source for their version of the truth or facts. However, you will find that they tend to portray their side with a rosy picture, exaggerating the ill of the other party but do not mentioning their own shortcomings.

7.4 Objectivity

7.4.1 Are Journalists Objective?

Objectivity just like neutrality and impartiality mean not to take sides. But is it true that journalists do not take sides? Many journalists claim that they are at all times objective, neutral and impartial. They say "They do not make the news, they just report on it" (Retief 2002:99). They use the slogan: "we just report the facts.

According to Day 1991: 74, Objectivity is a controversial value and not all media theorists and practitioners ascribe to it. Day asserts that it is probably impossible to achieve it. "The reality however, is that all people are subjective, partial and biased" (Retief 2002: 99). Journalists are no exception but many of them do not accept this. Mary Kay said: "*Aerodynamically speaking, a bumblebee shouldn't be able to fly, but the bumblebee doesn't know that, so it goes on flying anyway*". Drawing from Ash's words of wisdom, if one wants to be a good journalist, you had better understand this fundamental human trait that all people are subjective, journalists inclusive.

7.5 Objectivity is a commitment

The first step to overcoming subjectivity is therefore to understand that although you are a journalist but as a human being you are subjective. The second step is to make a quality decision, that is, "a fundamental commitment" as Retief 2002: 102 calls it "*to strive to be objective*". This means nothing but the commitment to report *truthfully, comprehensively, and intelligently*. Always put an event into its right *perspective or context*.

8.0 Ethical Dilemmas

There are various pressures and challenges preventing journalists behaving ethically. These range from poor remuneration packages, ambush managers, tight lips, political pressure, commercialism and ownership.

9.0 How do we achieve commitment and passion for the profession?

9.1 Always Remember you have a responsibility to the public no one else will do it except you

You make factual information available. The traditional role of the media and their key function as reporters of facts is to give the public the information necessary to make good decisions and sound choices using various communication technologies. They are the outlets for disseminating large amounts of information to reach large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audiences. While this is a daily duty, it is nevertheless, particularly important during the electoral process when the leadership of the country must be elected.

9.2 You facilitate participation by ensuring that many voices are heard

You give a chance to many important but otherwise ignored or neglected voices. Remember the minority are as important as the majority in a democracy and without them there is no democracy. Greater participation by all citizens in democratic processes is therefore one key element of good governance. Participation of the citizenry through representation in the house of parliament and other similar institutions is not extensive and intensive. The media fills this huge gap by providing plural voices, space and agenda for public dialogue and debate. A multiplicity of voices means that differing perspectives will be heard. These differences are so critical in fostering democratic dialogue and moving forward as a country and as a society.

9.3 A free media is critical in ensuring transparency

By now it should be common knowledge that transparency is a fundamental precept in good governance everywhere. In Malawi, like elsewhere, the media is sometimes referred to as a "watch dog," in large part because of its willingness to "bark" when something seems amiss. To some extent, a free media is also a beacon or a flashlight, shining a light on dark corners that some would prefer to ignore. Whatever the metaphor or image, it is difficult to imagine how issues of corruption, accountability and transparency can be effectively be addressed in the absence of a free and professional

media. Imagine an electoral process that is devoid of transparent transactions and accountability. It would be like allowing someone sneak into your house in darkness only to realise you have a python sleeping next to you.

It is therefore important that for the media to carry out their important role effectively and efficiently, the media should operate within a well defined code of ethics while maintaining their freedom and editorial independence. Since irresponsible journalism invites restriction, robbing off the media its freedom, professional conduct and ethical practice are vital to safeguarding freedom of the media and ensuring that public trust invested in the media is sustained.

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