

Journalistic Imperatives: Saying What Others Might Not Say

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The world of journalism, like any other profession, can be muddled with a plethora of distractions, self-interests and agendas that certainly do not serve the cause of a free press. Outside as well as inside pressures and interests often compromise the very essence of the journalist's mission.

In general terms, a journalist should hold her or himself accountable to some basic guiding principals, the attainment of which are at times extremely difficult: to relay the story the way the journalist sees it, not the way she or he is expected to see it; to avoid sensationalism, and to adhere to as much objectivity as possible.

A journalist is a conveyor of information, whether that is regarding a car accident on a highway or the news of a village that was wiped off the map in Afghanistan. Regardless of what story is being told, a journalist must consult his or her conscience in the way the story is conveyed, without fear and without regard for anyone's vested interests. On a practical level, there comes a time when a journalist has to take sides; when one's moral responsibility compels one to take the side of the victim, the weak, the dispossessed and the disadvantaged.

Through many years I have found, to my dismay, that often the authentic story is the least of anyone's concern. A poignant example of this is the Western media's representation of the Mid-East- based Al-Jazeera network. At their inception, various Western powers and their respective media initially welcomed Al-Jazeera, as it, at that time, seemed primarily focussed on exposing the dirty laundry of Arab regimes. It was encouraged, celebrated and often used to highlight the intolerance of Arab states to freedom of expression rights.

It was only after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the deadly war on Afghanistan, and later Iraq, that Al-Jazeera was transformed from being an "island" of democracy and freedom to a derided mouthpiece of terror. The fact is nothing has really changed in the way Al-Jazeera conducts its reports, a process that entails including all involved parties to make a case for themselves and "grilling" all those involved, largely with the same journalistic standards. It was truly unfair that Al-Jazeera was reduced from a complex media body to an "Osama bin Laden network".

This type of reductionism is beneficial, however, to some, for it diverts debate from issues of great import to that of pointing fingers and making what is immaterial the essence of discussion. That said; there are many in the West who enjoy Al-Jazeera's presence and have borrowed heavily from the network to make a case for their opposition to war.

But it must also be said that within Al-Jazeera itself similar agendas and interests cloud the presentation of many issues. Al-Jazeera is a very complex structure, with many internal pushes and pulls, many within who have their own self-serving agendas, just like anywhere else. It's not a cohesive political structure and is indeed subject to its governmental and personal interests. But again, it was wrongly viewed with reductionism, exaggeration and hype.

While many would find that alternative forms of media are the answer to such growing problems as these, current media trends testify to the fact that more is not always better and that advanced technologies, while they may advance certain aspects of communications and allow disadvantaged groups greater access, also create useless competition and misinformation. But for the most part, today's media — those outlets particularly manifested through large media conglomerates — are establishments with clear political agendas, explicit or subtle, but unmistakable.

In a recent article I wrote, "Managing consent: the art of war, democracy and public relations", I tried to trace the history of that relationship between the state, the corporation and the media. In a more recent article, "Media language and war: manufacturing convenient realities", I attempted to further refashion the discussion to more contemporary periods, using Iraq as the centrepiece. Generally, I think that the media is willingly used — or allows itself to be used — for political agendas and for state propaganda, a role that can only be described as fraudulent. Nonetheless, the huge gap left open by subservient corporate media called and allowed for the development of alternative means of communication, some with their own agenda but widespread enough to balance out.

At the end of the day, members of the press must answer to themselves, fellow citizens and those whom they represent in their reports. Making waves and making enemies in this line of work does not necessarily mean you are doing anything wrong. On the contrary, you may indeed be on the right track. It is when you speak out on issues that cause discomfort or offence that you truly find your integrity as a writer. You learn quickly that you cannot necessarily have friends in high places and at the same time maintain the trust and respect of those on the ground.

In my own experience, there are moments — if rare — when I feel gratified; when I know that I have raised enough awareness regarding a certain topic, moving it from the rank of the negligible to that worthy of attention. I felt exhilarated when one of my articles resulted in a fiery statement from an embassy, demanding that my articles be blocked from that country's newspapers. I very much like it when a newspaper in Nigeria, or a Burmese opposition newspaper, for example, runs my articles regarding matters in their respective countries. Such endorsements may perhaps raise some eyebrows, but they are also indication that you are on the right track.

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