

1

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL JOURNALISM

It was a small story in a local newspaper. It began:

Mrs Hattie Carroll, 51, Negro waitress at the Emerson Hotel, died last week as a result of the brutal beating by a wealthy socialite during the exclusive Spinsters' Ball at that hotel.

(Wood, 1963)

That article, published in the *Baltimore Sun* in February 1963, went on to explain that Hattie Carroll had been hit with a cane by farm owner William Zantzinger. Mrs Carroll was a black woman with 10 children. She died in hospital from internal haemorrhaging. Zantzinger, who was white, was arrested and released on bail. In August of that year he received a six months' jail sentence for manslaughter, and the story was picked up by other parts of the United States media. According to a report of the court case in *Time* magazine (1963): "The judges considerably deferred the start of the jail sentence until Sept 15, to give Zantzinger time to harvest his tobacco crop."

Fleetingly, the case was brought to national attention. Or, at least, to the attention of those paying attention, one of whom was a 22-year-old folk singer going by the name of Bob Dylan. Within days he had written *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*. "This is a true story," Dylan would tell audiences when introducing the song. "This was taken out of the newspapers. Nothing but the words have been changed" (quoted in Corcoran, 2003: 153). In what has been described as a "journalistic narrative" (Hajdu, 2001: 189),

2 THE ETHICAL JOURNALIST

The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll introduces us to the characters, gives us the facts, fills in the background to the story, and builds layer upon layer of understanding. It has been described as “perhaps Dylan’s most journalistic song” (Frazier, 2004), telling the story “with the economy of a news reporter and the imagery of a poet” (Sounes, 2002: 176). Dylan’s words continue to speak to audiences down the years. Thanks to his song, countless thousands of people around the world have now heard the story of Hattie Carroll and William Zantzinger: a human interest story of two individuals that tells us something about society.

THE FIRST DUTY OF THE JOURNALIST

As with many journalists, Dylan has on occasions been accused of distorting the facts of a case to fit his own agenda (Heylin, 2001: 124–5). But Dylan is an artist, not a reporter. When a singer says that a song is true, their words are taken as meaning that the song is *based* on a true story, that the facts are *broadly* as indicated in the lyrics, and/or that the song is true to the emotion or spirit of real events. A reporter makes a very different promise; a promise that is implicit in all journalism. When a journalist says, “This is a true story,” that is precisely what she or he means. That’s why the very first clause of the international journalists’ code – see Appendix 1 – declares: “Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.” The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) brings together journalists’ organisations from more than 100 countries and, although few of their half-a-million members could recite the code in detail, most journalists understand the principle: that our job is indeed to get at the truth.

Which is not to say that journalists always report the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth can be an elusive beast to hunt down, even without the help of those philosophers who tell us that it does not exist. And the truth can hurt. Consider the following three examples of truthful reporting.

After the *Derbyshire Times* reported that Brampton Rovers trounced Waltheof by 29 goals to nil in an under-nines football match, the Sheffield and District Junior Sunday League ordered clubs not to tell local newspapers the results of matches in which any team lost by more than 14 goals. This was apparently motivated by a desire to prevent the defeated children feeling humiliated (Scott, 2004). A minor example, perhaps, but it demonstrates that, for journalists, ethical considerations can arise when you least expect them, even when reporting the football scores.

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL JOURNALISM 3

In common with most local newspapers in the UK, the *Kenilworth Weekly News* routinely reports on sports days and other events at schools in its circulation area. But it was forced to stop publishing children's surnames after a bogus kidnapper caused intense distress by telephoning parents and claiming he had snatched their children. Police said the hoaxer had targeted parents whose children had been identified in newspaper coverage of primary school functions (Lagan, 2005). It is another example of a simple, everyday story having potential ethical implications.

Reporters covering the siege at Middle School Number One in the small Russian town of Beslan presumably acted in good faith when they reported the fact that relatives outside the school were receiving mobile phone calls from some of the hostages inside. But when the hijackers heard this on television they forced hostages to hand over their mobiles and shot a man for making a call (Walsh, 2004). It is a life-and-death example of the weighty responsibility borne by journalists, even when reporting accurately. But journalists do not always report accurately.

Not according to Eymen, at least. He is a Kurdish refugee who fled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Talking to a group of journalists in the UK, he told us about taking a call on his mobile one day: it was a friend, asking if he could help a new asylum seeker who had just arrived in town with nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, and no money. The call came just as Eymen was passing a newspaper kiosk that displayed banner headlines about asylum seekers being housed in luxurious mansions. The irony was not lost on him. So obsessed are parts of the UK media with asylum seekers that, when they are absent from the front pages, he asks the shopkeeper: "What's the matter, have asylum seekers done nothing wrong today?" (quoted in Harcup, 2003).

Such coverage is beyond a joke for Sandra Nyaira, former political editor of the *Daily News* in Zimbabwe and now a member of the Exiled Journalists Network in the UK, who explains:

In the last year alone I have read articles, mostly in the tabloids, that blamed refugees, nay, asylum seekers ... for the rapid spread of infectious diseases like TB, the dreaded HIV/Aids virus, Sars, as well as housing shortages and even terrorism ... As soon as they land at Gatwick or Heathrow, they blight Britain's services. It is all sheer hypocrisy ... The public trust most of the things they read in newspapers so journalists must be responsible in the way they present issues that directly affect the lives of others, especially those who are in no position to answer back.

(Nyaira, 2004)

Asylum seekers are people with histories and, therefore, with stories. But sections of the UK press too often seem intent on demonising them as a

4 THE ETHICAL JOURNALIST

group – a label – rather than treating them as individuals with their own tales to tell. That is not just unethical journalism, it's bad journalism.

There is certainly too much stereotyping going under the banner of journalism, just as there is too much clichéd coverage, empty-headed celebrity-chasing, peering into people's bedrooms, hysterical yapping and yelping ... and far, far too many columnists taking up resources that could be devoted to reporting. As the redoubtable journalist Paul Foot put it, when discussing "freedom of the press":

Nothing wastes newspaper space more than columnists "letting off steam", especially if they are billed as "frank" or "fearless". There is nothing specially free about a courageous or fearless opinion which involves no courage or fear whatsoever.

(Foot, 2000: 79)

Even our popular newspapers look positively highbrow in comparison to those "lads' mags" in which the height of journalistic ambition seems to be to persuade a model to pose in what one editor describes fondly as "subservient poses with her arse in the air" (quoted in Turner, 2005).

GOOD JOURNALISM

However, there is also journalism that can inform, surprise, challenge, shock, even inspire, as well as entertain. When I wake up in the morning I can turn on BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, for example, and discover something that I didn't already know. I can even learn the "unknown unknowns" that (to paraphrase US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld) I didn't know that I didn't know. It's far from perfect, and I often shout at the radio in exasperation, but listening to the *Today* programme invariably leaves me better informed, having been exposed to a mixture of reportage and discussion, interesting questions, and even the occasional straight answer. It is essential listening.

Similarly, I can never pick up a quality national newspaper without finding something to interest me. It might be the front-page splash or the hard news in the early pages, but it is just as likely to be an analytical backgrounder, a quirkily written, warts-and-all obituary, or a photograph that captures some moment of sporting ballet in all its glory. The UK "popular" papers may leave me cold with their tales about the antics of celebs, but such papers also have the ability to highlight social issues in as dramatic and powerful a manner as does any journalism anywhere on the globe. They can also make me laugh out loud. And there is something deeply pleasing about

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL JOURNALISM 5

falling asleep at night listening to journalists describe a football match on the radio, then waking up and finding a newspaper on the doormat containing an account of the same game, complete with pictures. And if you don't want to wait for the morning, you can go online and get similar coverage almost instantly. It feels like magic, but in reality it's just people getting on with their jobs, often in difficult circumstances. Even the freebie *Metro* newspaper, despite its lack of investment in editorial staff, can provide enough clearly written bite-sized news items to brighten up a brief bus journey. It also has the potential to surprise, as with its description of a motorist who was fined for splashing pedestrians as a "puddle toll martyr"¹ (*Metro*, 3 November 2005).

The BBC and our national newspapers may be regarded as the regular "agenda setters" of journalism, but thousands of journalists work elsewhere in the media. There are magazines that cover virtually every subject imaginable, often with flair and imagination as well as specialist expertise. There is a minority ethnic press serving sections of the population that feel misrepresented or simply rendered invisible by much of the rest of the media. There are local and regional newspapers that – despite relentless staffing cuts – can still tell people more about what is going on where they live than they hear from their neighbours, and that can run lively campaigns on behalf of their readers. And there is *Private Eye*, which is in a must-read class of its own for most journalists.

On television there are investigative current affairs slots that – sometimes, at least – tell us things we don't already know. The powerful and challenging journalism of John Pilger can be found on ITV, albeit infrequently and usually late at night. There are 24 hour news channels that can broadcast live coverage of press conferences, parliamentary debates, and events such as a whale swimming into central London. There are broadcast journalists who do everything from distilling local events into brief bulletins on commercial radio to analysing world events at length every evening on the frequently excellent *Channel Four News*. There are journalists whose work goes straight onto the web, combining traditional elements of print, TV and radio reporting to make something new. And there are freelance reporters and news agencies who try to ensure that nobody can cough or spit on their patch without them hearing and, if possible, making a story about it. Beyond all that there are international media, mostly now available online. There also exist alternative media that make use of journalistic techniques to challenge and critique what we get from mainstream media (Harcup, 2005b; 2006).

Then there are the countless bloggers, whose online web logs include the good, bad and the ugly of the internet age, and who can inform, educate and entertain while "stretching the boundaries" of journalism (Allan, 2004:

6 THE ETHICAL JOURNALIST

180). And there is the potential for citizens increasingly to get in on the act, believes broadcast journalist Jon Snow. He points to the way in which coverage of the “barbarity of American troops in Fallujah” was made possible because, although journalists were kept out of the Iraqi city, footage was taken by local people. “It has only been exposed because people have been able to take video and use the web to get it to us,” says Snow. “The opportunities are fantastic. I just can’t see the secret society surviving” (quoted in Kiss, 2006).

ETHOS OF THIS BOOK

There is, then, much to celebrate about journalism. But we cannot take good journalism for granted. The ethos of this book is that to be good journalists we need to be thinking journalists, or reflective practitioners. By this I mean that journalists should be encouraged to reflect critically on our job – both individually and collectively – *while* we are doing it. To date, much discussion of the ethical dimensions of journalism has been bogged down in worthy-but-abstract philosophising or sidetracked into treating ethics as a set of obstacles blocking journalists’ paths. That is why this is not another book about ethics. It is a book about journalism.

Its starting point is that, as we have seen, *everything* journalists do – from reporting on a school sports day to covering international conflict – has potential ethical implications. Whether we recognise it or not, ethics are involved in every story we follow up or ignore; every interview we request; every conversation with a confidential source; every quote we use, leave out or tidy up; every bit of context we squeeze in, simplify or exclude; every decision to create (sorry, report) a “row”; every photograph we select or “improve”; every soundbite we choose to use; every approach from an advertiser trying to influence editorial copy; every headline we write; every question we ask or don’t ask. For the ethical journalist, it is not enough to have a bulging contacts book or a good nose for news; being an ethical journalist also means asking questions about our own practice.

If everything that journalists do has ethical implications, it follows that no one book could possibly deal with all the ethical issues that may arise during a journalist’s career. That is as true of the big issues – such as racism and sexism – as of specifics ranging from the embedding of war reporters to the selection of stick-thin models by women’s magazines. So, this book will not cover every single issue ever faced by journalists, nor every type of society within which journalists operate. Although written primarily from a UK perspective, it seeks to highlight the key principles involved and to aid

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL JOURNALISM 7

understanding of why and how journalism is practised. It will not attempt to lay down a series of do's and don'ts or provide a list of problems to be ticked off; still less will it attempt to provide a list of easy answers. Instead, it will explore a range of ethical considerations at a practical level, and discuss such considerations within the context of historical and contemporary ideas about what journalism is for. By discussing a range of ideas, arguments and examples – and by adopting a questioning, challenging approach – I hope it will support journalists and journalism students in thinking about the implications of what they are doing, in whatever medium and country they are doing it. The aim is to encourage critical analysis within the classroom and a more reflective practice within the newsroom, based on the idea that theory can inform practice and vice versa.

Not that we will all think alike, of course. Journalists should “become more self-reflective and less careless with their power”, argues John Lloyd (2004: 141), a *Financial Times* journalist who is now a director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University. I agree with Lloyd on that, but the results of my reflections – on the Hutton Inquiry, for example (Harcup, 2005a) – are quite different from those in his influential lament about the state of UK journalism, *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*. When dealing with as messy a business as journalism, such a difference of opinion is inevitable; in fact, it is probably desirable. As John Stuart Mill put it in his famous *Essay on Liberty*:

Truth ... has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners ... Only through diversity of opinion is there, in the existing state of human intellect, a chance of fair play to all sides of truth ... [T]here is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides; it is when they attend only to one that errors harden into prejudices ...

(Mill [1859] 1997: 27)

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book will draw on the reflections of a range of journalists, on my own experience as both journalist and academic, on a large number of published sources, and on original research (including interviews conducted by the author in recent years). Issues and principles will be approached via specific examples and case studies, drawn from a range of media. Chapter 2 will look at why journalism matters to society and consider the implications of challenges to journalism ranging from the Hutton Report in the UK to the *New York Times* fakery case in the United States. Discussion of why

8 THE ETHICAL JOURNALIST

journalism matters leads inevitably to the concept of journalists as a fourth estate, acting as a form of watchdog on government, and this will be addressed in Chapter 3. Fulfilling this watchdog role has led to some journalists using subterfuge, justifying their actions as being in the public interest. This public interest defence will form the basis of Chapter 4, which will explore investigative and undercover reporting. Chapters 5 and 6 will consider the implications of the choices made by journalists in selecting news stories and in their relationships with sources. All these issues will be discussed within the context of one particular genre of journalism – crime reporting – in Chapter 7. Chapters 8 and 9 will look at a range of what might be termed ethical interventions, first in the form of self-regulation and statutory regulation, then by tracing a hidden history of journalists standing up for ethical journalism. Finally, Chapter 10 will draw together the key themes of the book: that ethical journalism is good journalism and that good journalism is ethical journalism.

This book will discuss many of the pressures that, arguably, make it harder to practise good, ethical journalism; trends that, for some, came to a head at the British Press Awards in 2005, when the Scoop of the Year went to the *News of the World*'s “sensational ... hugely entertaining” account of a footballer having sex with somebody who wasn't his wife (British Press Awards, 2005: 46). When the *News of the World* – aka *News of the Screws* – was also named National Newspaper of the Year, the decision dismayed those who believe that, in the words of media pundit Roy Greenslade (2005), “journalism is not about the size of a chequebook, dubious invasions of privacy and the weekly purveying of sleaze”. Although the Newspaper of the Year prize was given to the redesigned *Guardian* the following year, Scoop of the Year once again went to a celebrity story, this time a tale about a model taking drugs (*Press Gazette*, 2006b). Whatever next? Final proof that bears defecate in the woods?

The idea that journalists should be content to entertain audiences with titillating tittle-tattle is an insidious one, argues Francis Williams, a thoughtful commentator on media affairs who was editor of the *Daily Herald*:

The real danger facing a good deal of journalism today ... is that it will be pressed into a pattern that denies it all purpose other than the purely commercial one of attracting the largest number of paying customers by whatever means comes most readily to hand ... The defence of journalism as more than a trade and greater than an entertainment technique – although a trade it is and entertaining it must be – is properly the journalists' and no one else's.

(Williams, 1959: 225)

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICAL JOURNALISM 9

Those words were written almost half a century ago, but – as with Bob Dylan’s account of the death of Hattie Carroll – they speak to us still.

FURTHER READING

As a companion volume to *Journalism: principles and practice* (Harcup, 2004), this book is intended for those with some knowledge of the basics of journalism, gained through practice, study or both. It aims to build on such an understanding of the basics to improve the quality of journalism; at the same time, it will investigate the foundations of journalism to explore what it is all *for*. More specific suggestions for further reading will be made at the end of each chapter; full publication details for these appear in the References Section. Meanwhile, you can read the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* at www.bobdylan.com or listen to the song on the CDs *The Times They Are A-Changin’* and *The Bootleg Series Vol 6: Bob Dylan Live 1964*.

NOTE

¹ Anyone who doesn’t understand the reference should look up the Tolpuddle Martyrs on the internet and delight in the fact that a sub on a throwaway freesheet was prepared to stretch his or her readers.