

Conference 2003: Journalism ethics

The Empowering Effect of Ethics

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Abstract: Many aspirants join journalism programmes aware of a public perception that journalists are not ethical. They face pressure, prejudice and discouragement from family and friends – this is particularly true among indigenous students. But as the papers on ethics unfold, the code/s are discussed and the students relate their personal values to the ethical decisions they will have to make, they are empowered to function far more professionally and advocate for what they believe. The metamorphosis is noticeable - almost palpable. Training indigenous journalists to work in two environments brings special challenges. In New Zealand, Maori trainees also have to face criticism that they have “sold out” to a Pakeha (European) mainstream media that may not have a good, ethical, track-record on reporting Maori issues. Teaching these students they can do their job **and** keep the faith is largely based on their confidence in a defensible ethical code and the confidence to advocate.

Over the past 10 years there has been a call among Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, and some non-Maori, for the media to take a good look at the way in which it reports Maori issues and the way it applies traditional news values.

Treaty of Waitangi settlements, new legislation relating to the environment, and a general move by Maori to reclaim their place have provided a wealth of highly accessible news stories. A nationally-led move towards “partnership” has carried some expectation that the media would pay better attention to its method of coverage, but the European perspective has largely prevailed.

Over the past decade there has been a serious call for change, and one logical way of doing this was to train more Maori as journalists.

The journalism programme at the Waiariki Institute of Technology was one of the first in New Zealand to introduce more Maori into mainstream media, and more recently to train Maori students with the excellent language skills needed to work in Maori media, which is frequently delivered in Te Reo (Maori language).

The informal mission statement of the Waiariki journalism programme has evolved into a two-fold one. On one hand it trains Maori people to be journalists, and on the other it trains non Maori who wish to work effectively and sensitively as journalists in the Maori environment. Each intake includes about two thirds Maori, one third non- Maori.

This paper explains just some of the dilemmas and challenges this throws up for the trainees, and their tutors, in terms of staying faithful to basic news gathering, making way for cultural differences and expectations, and giving the trainees the confidence to apply a bi-cultural ethos to their work.

Realisation is dawning on mainstream media that it should be employing journalists who are comfortable in surroundings where Maori gather, who can identify the many excellent stories which abound in the Maori environment, and know how to work bi-culturally - so the demand for Waiariki graduates grows.

But it has not been easy. The programme has experienced severe growing pains. Ideally it should be led by Maori journalists, but they are still few and far between and in such high demand that they can find better paid positions in the media, Parliament and public relations.

Notable among the Waiariki graduates are Maramena Roderick who was Television New Zealand's London reporter for three years, Gideon Porter who is the Maori issues reporter for National Radio, and two recent graduates, both fluent Reo speakers, who are fronting Te Karere, Television One's Maori news programme.

Now the Waiariki programme has two intakes of 17 students a year, it is 18 months long and includes extra modules on working in the Maori environment, some basic language skills, and more in-depth study of the Treaty of Waitangi and Maori culture.

The attrition rate is high for a number of reasons. We have to supply significant pastoral care, and we have to empower the students to take on what can be a crusading role.

Central to this is the mainstream media's adherence to the Galtung and Ruge (Abel 1997) news values. These identify such factors as frequency, threshold, un-ambiguity, meaningfulness, and continuity, and have in the past been applied most strenuously to news relating to Maori. This news had been kept quite separate from the general news of the country.

Until quite recently in New Zealand we had "Maori news"...the reporters covered "Maori affairs", and there was an acceptance that The News was for everyone, then there was Maori News for Maori people, and more recently there has been an injection of Maori news into The News because it has provided rich pickings in terms of negativity, number 12 on the Galtung and Ruge scale of news values.

More than 10 years ago New Zealand journalist-academic James Tully (1990 p141) wrote:

Generally reporters and editors have made their own rules for handling race relations and reporting Maori affairs based on traditional attitudes to the role of the media, newsworthiness and media ethics....

....The role of the news media in race relations is clear: to inform, to educate and to explain.

His words largely fell on deaf ears. Professors Judy McGregor and Ranginui Walker (2002) are just two of many academics within a bi-cultural New Zealand who frequently bemoan the handling of Maori issues by the country's media. The dissemination of news, almost from the 1840 signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, New Zealand's founding partnership document, was dictated by the European 'establishment'. (Walker 2000).

From the nineteenth century to the present day the Fourth Estate has played a consistent role in the way it selects, constructs and publishes news about Maori. This one sided discourse has resulted in Maori seceding from mainstream media to construct their own positive stories of success and cultural revival says Dr Walker (2002 p231).

Dr McGregor applied Galtung and Ruge's hierarchy of news values to the reporting of Maori news in a working paper while she was a member of the Human Resource Department of Massey University (1991).

She found that the mainstream media's preoccupation with "bad news" has so frequently been applied to Maori news that the two have become inextricably linked. In essence the news values employed by the New Zealand news media, which follow the criteria identified by Galtung and Ruge, are Pakeha (European) news values, points out Dr McGregor.

It is against this backdrop that journalism educators in New Zealand, and particularly those at Waiariki, are facing up to a huge challenge: to produce a fresh breed of journalists who can relate the dominant news values in New Zealand bi-culturally.

Training predominantly Maori journalism students does not mean ignoring Galtung and Ruge's contention that the first eight criteria do not vary significantly with variations in human culture, but it does mean applying them in their purest sense, and not allowing them to be influenced by the dominant race.

Mainstream media which have failed to do this for at least a century are now finding they are being challenged by a strong Maori media which places a different value on the values.

Magazines such as Mana, sold as "the Maori news magazine for all New Zealanders" seek to celebrate Maori achievement, and the full colour advertisements it attracts send a provocative message to mainstream media about where the market may be shifting.

Mana is applying the Galtung and Ruge values relating to culture and elite nations in contradiction to convention. To the people who produce Mana the elite nation is Aotearoa, to them the elite people are Maori – and personalisation abounds.

David Robie (2001) sums it up in his "Four Worlds News Values" where in the "Fourth World" under the heading of Self Determination he lists an independent voice, language, culture and solidarity with other indigenous minorities as the dominant news values for people such as Maori and Koori.

This set of values presents indigenous journalism students – and their trainers - with a dilemma. On one hand they are being taught all the usual values of negativity, accessibility, and unexpectedness, but on the other they can see great stories in the philosophies of self determination and solidarity.

Writing positive stories about what was previously in the "bad news" genre takes courage. A canvass of past and present students showed they were quite advanced in their ability to decide when to apply first world news values and when to apply those of the fourth world. Not one of them felt they would walk away from facts, balance and good ethical standards but they felt empowered to take on the gatekeepers and advocate for people, culture and the minority when it was news.

So how to equip students who wish to take that enlightened attitude into the media? How to arm them to wage back against a war of words, which have damned for almost two centuries? Studies of the effects of continual media coverage such as the Gulf wars and the World Trade Centre attacks show how consumers of the news can become inured to it's ability to shock, outrage, or disgust and Megan Boler (1995) calls this "the repetitive trauma of media".

A similar situation could be identified in New Zealand where the final product in the mainstream media often has an emphasis on conflict, on the "bad news" and defines Maori people in "problem terms". McGregor (1991).

Journalism students at Waiariki have made the choice to learn their craft from the Maori perspective but they are aware that they are facing an uphill battle and that dilemma is always there. They are seeking to present a view of the news in New Zealand which has been ignored, discouraged, and until recently suppressed.

It should be made clear that while the graduates are keen to advocate for stories which are presented with more understanding of the Maori world, they still remain faithful to the basic tenets of journalism ie truth, balance, fact and accuracy. This means that not only do they need to put the balance into Maori news, but they are aware of the public's perception of journalists.

It is well known that journalism has a poor image with the public, says Andrew Belsey (1998 p1). They (the public) do not regard it highly. They are suspicious of journalists and the way they practice their trade. Journalists are regarded in the same way as politicians, as disreputable, untrustworthy and dishonest, pushing a personal or sectional interest rather than the facts of the case. Add to this the scepticism many Maori feel about mainstream media and the students need all the help they can get to feel good about their choice of career and the conviction to apply it ethically.

In the early stages of the programme many say they feel pressure, prejudice and discouragement. Some have been criticised for "selling out" to mainstream media with its poor track record. Ex-graduates come back and talk to the students honestly about the dilemmas they will face.

The biggest challenge is how to equip them to deal with all this. How do you make students feel confident they are entering a profession in which they can apply their personal values and still function professionally?

A generic starting point is an amalgam of the codes of ethics or practice in New Zealand today. These are all reasonably similar. When taught in tandem with New Zealand 's Acts of Parliament relating to privacy, human rights, protected disclosures and defamation they reveal a framework against which a journalist can operate and they provide a mandate for journalists to advocate for public interest.

The New Zealand National Union of Journalists' Code of Conduct states (number 10) that *...A journalist shall only mention a person's race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, disability, marital status, or lack of it, gender or sexual orientation if this information is strictly relevant. A journalist shall neither originate nor process material, which encourages discrimination on any of the above grounds.* This provides a key building block.

Trainees are quick to point out that when “bad” news is involved race is often considered relevant, when “good” news is involved little trouble is taken to find out the interviewee's whakapapa or family background, or it is just forgotten. They ask why phrases such as “Maori gang”, or “Maori radical” appear in the media with sinister and bad-news connotations, but the rider referring to race rarely appears for non-Maori.

In 1999 the American Society of Newspaper Editors asked two leading media ethicists in the US to analyse 33 current codes. On the subject of diversity and racial identification Robert Steele and Jay Black found that only five of 33 newspapers addressed that issue in their codes. They described it as one of the most challenging issues facing the newspapers surveyed.

The trainees' study of bi-culturally applied ethics provides a professional plank on which they can start to build their decision-making, and there is no doubt that as they learn so do they grow - but they can also feel cynical. They study the New Zealand Press Council. This is a body set up to “provide the public with an independent forum for resolution for complaints against the press”, according to the 30th Report of the Press Council (2002 p101).

Their early observations of this watchdog of the printed word in mainstream and Maori media are that it does not include any Maori representation, and the only reference to racial reporting in material on its role comes under the general principle regarding discrimination. There is no specific provision for any Maori membership on the council, either among the industry representatives or the public members. The council confirms that it would consider complaints relating to Maori media if they were laid.

The trainees are quick to discern where the ethical codes are providing them with the signposts they need to make appropriate decisions on a daily basis – and they grow into that decision-making quickly and confidently. They learn to balance ego and risk-taking against decency and pride in values. But trainees who aspire to work successfully in the Maori environment must learn how to work professionally as a journalist within the clear protocols of Maori culture and customs.

When non-Maori students talk in the classroom about how they feel unsure of their status on the marae (the meeting place), where to go and how to do their job without causing offence, the Maori trainees are quick to point out they feel the same way. The complexities of differing kawa, or customs of each tribal area, and how to respect these if they are to work ethically means they need a set of standards which can take them across both dominant cultures – and others. So while mainstream ethics are taught, so must the ethics or protocols of the marae, where Maori are on their own sacred place.

In New Zealand an increasing number of political and social events of importance are being held on marae – the journalist who cannot do their job AND behave acceptably will not last long.

Empowering student journalists to do what is right also empowers them to point to what is still wrong.

That canvass of students and ex-students from four intakes found that about a third wanted to see a code of racial reporting conduct introduced in New Zealand. There are precedents. For example, the National Union of Journalists in Great Britain in 1974 established a race relations working party and later developed a set of race relations guidelines for reporters. There are also codes of ethical race reporting in many other areas of the world.

However not all Maori trainees from Waiariki felt it was important, in fact several were clear that their role was to tell a story truthfully, factually and ethically whatever culture they were working in and this was mandate enough for them. It also empowered them enough to answer criticism about working in an area which has not served Maori well because they WILL do better in the future.

Maori people have a very strong sense of where they have come from. Their culture is rich in respect, dignity and strength of character. If as educators of bi-cultural journalists we can develop those ethical qualities in our students and meld them with the universal professional requirements of journalists all over the world, we will have met a challenge which is long overdue.

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