



Towards a Professional Code of Ethics to Regulate Arab Media?

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today and I'd like to extend a special thanks to the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for having invited me.

We hear a lot about the need for a professional code of ethics to regulate media, in the Arab world and the West, but how often do we consider the consequences of such a call to arms and whether it is the ultimate solution to all the media's ills?

The word “code” as defined by Webster's Collegiate Dictionary gives us “a systematically arranged collection of existing laws.” So, we're assuming that we already have media laws in the Arab world and that they need to be arranged systematically.

We're also assuming from the title given this panel that one code of ethics will monolithically regulate Arab media in all their permutations.

The first lesson I used to teach my students, based on 25 years of experience as a foreign correspondent and editor, is “never assume anything.” If you do, it's a key ingredient for trouble.

But before delving into the matter, let's examine some case studies and arguments on what media are doing wrong, or right, and how they serve as examples upon which we may build a solid foundation for ethics.

Introduction:

Foundations are where we ought to begin if we're seeking long-lasting results. According to a study just released by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, there's a need to preserve the critical relationship between democracy and the press, which draws upon the quality of journalists.

In the study entitled “Improving the Education of Tomorrow's Journalists,” the Carnegie Corporation, although referring to American media, may well have been pointing to Lebanese or Arab media as well.

“In the early days of the Republic,” the study began, “when press outlets were openly owned by or affiliated with competing political interests, the field of journalism was rife with contest. Many newspapers of that era, instead of being exemplars of truth and fair play, were replete with vitriol and distortion. Indeed there was little expectation that an objective truth be reported; it was in the variety and multiplicity of voices that the facts could emerge.”

Sound familiar? A few centuries later, I believe these words still apply and take on an added dimension with the new media, all the more so since we've become so reliant on the Internet and satellite television for our news content.

Recent polls have found that media, notably the news arms of the various infotainment conglomerates, have come under increased scrutiny for their handling of news and their sliding credibility, given the frequency with which editors, publishers and managers have had to retract stories, run corrections or journalists have had to resign following unsavory disclosures about how information was gathered and delivered.

What is needed is a profession comprising educated, informed, ethical and skilled individuals, said the Carnegie report to which I referred earlier.

While acknowledging that profits take precedence over other priorities in the real world, the study's authors nonetheless called for a re-examination of what counts in the business of journalism today, starting with that much abused term "objectivity," the need for mastery of one's subject—something journalism schools have often failed to provide their charges—as well as revisiting curricula to better reflect needs and realities, and, the ever-present reminder of journalistic ethics.

Whither ethics?

I've surveyed a good many countries of the world and have found countless codes of ethics, from the government-imposed to the self-applied. Most have common threads dealing with decency, privacy, conflict of interest, sources, accuracy, and the like. But some go the extra mile to dictate conditions that make reporting all the more difficult.

For example, in Lebanon, the mostly government-appointed Audio-Visual Media Council gathered media heads in the run-up to parliamentary elections to propose a code of ethics that in one of its clauses stipulates the need to separate advertising from editorial content in covering elections.

In short: if you mix up the two you get into trouble. Is that the business of government? We all know that candidates promote themselves and none better than those who own media outlets. Is it unethical or illegal? Can viewers, readers and listeners tell the difference? Sure they can. Assuming they're stupid and gullible is an insult to them and another ploy to muzzle the opposition.

That's what happened in the case of Murr Television (MTV) in Lebanon, when its owner ran for parliament and used his station as an advertising platform. But because he was a vocal opponent of the government, his actions were deemed illegal. So where do we draw the line between illegality and unethical behavior? And who ultimately decides?

The Newsweek affair regarding the reporting of flushing or non-flushing of the Holy Koran by interrogators at Guantanamo detention center in an attempt to soften and intimidate Muslim prisoners accused of terrorism is only the most recent example of below-par journalism, and even lower standards of official "spin."

The charges and counter-charges by media and officialdom have further undermined the fourth estate's noble cause as the watchdog of government by holding decision-makers accountable. In a case like this, we'd have to go back to the basics about accurate sourcing, credibility, double checking facts and acting professionally when all hell breaks loose.

Tragically, in this case, the outraged reactions to the reports led to the deaths of over a dozen people. How does one factor that into a code of ethics?

A cartoon in the International Herald Tribune has President George Bush sitting at his desk in the Oval Office replying to angry people wearing turbans and veils at his door protesting about abuse and torture and asking who would take responsibility by saying: "Newsweek has apologized." How easy it is to pass the buck and shun responsibility for the greater evil.

Who's at fault? The one who commits abuses or the one who reports them?

Columnist/correspondent Raghida Dergham writing in Al Hayat suggested that just as Newsweek deserved prosecution if it erred, the Bush administration should also be held responsible for the heinous acts committed at Guantanamo, and Arab media should be criticized for their shortcomings, instigations to violence and kowtowing to governments, intelligence services and fundamentalism.

"As all good editors will tell you, every story, but particularly a scoop, rests on the details you uncover," wrote Michael Glackin, managing editor of The Daily Star. "If a single detail is incorrect you run the risk of seriously damaging an accurate story."

The editor of the American Journalism Review wrote that this was an awful time for journalism. "Each day brings new revelations of ethics breaches: fabrication, plagiarism, lifted quotes, rampant inaccuracy.

This, too, is something from which we suffer in the Arab media. Sources are often referred to in very watered down and foggy terms, accuracy falls victim to expediency, tight budgets, or personal attacks.

If we can't afford to pay for the subscription to the feature service providing the story, or if our correspondent is unable to handle that and other stories from the scene, we see no harm in making things up or using other people's hard work and taking credit for it.

It's not all like that, but there's enough of it to make one's stomach turn.

On the matter of Iraq, Arab media have provided both good and bad coverage but have certainly been a needed supplement to Western organizations that were constrained by the embedding of journalists, information management, and worse, on the part of the U.S. administration.

In their attempt to present Arab viewers, listeners, readers and browsers with more than the sanitized Pentagon versions of news, some channels may have gone overboard in focusing on blood, gore, tragedy and mayhem in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.

To obtain a balanced picture, Arab TV viewers especially have had to zap through countless local, regional and foreign channels to ensure a complete information diet. Fortunately, that's not too difficult.

But I still prefer having the option of variety, rather than monochromatic coverage, jazzed up by fancy graphics and mind-numbing clichés of the variety that gave us "Shock and Awe," "Line in the Sand," and "Weapons of Mass Destruction," or deception, as the case may be.

When are pictures of POWs considered propaganda? Should journalists be versed in the Geneva Conventions?

As with Iraq and Afghanistan, Palestine has had its share of tragedy and daily deaths. Numbers often fall victim to unethical or sloppy journalism. Which sources provide us with the best body counts?

Numbers in Arab journalistic parlance tend to be fluid, which is problematic when one is covering wars, disasters, tragedies and the like. How often have we seen exaggerations in numbers, only to be corrected later, and to throw a reporter's credibility to the wind?

If a demonstration attracted half a million people, there is no point in saying the crowd was a million and a half, as occurred during one of the rallies in downtown Beirut following the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri. Satellite pictures, good mathematics, engineers' and official estimates belied reports by certain media.

An analysis in *The Economist* in February pointed to the perils of using journalists as propagandists. All governments try to get away with it, using coercion, intimidation, blackmail, friendly persuasion, or the drying up of sources. Having worked in the media in Washington and the Middle East, I've seen the practice on both sides of the so-called cultural divide.

It also becomes dangerous when the old boundaries between reporting, commentary and punditry disappear, as noted by *The Economist*. It endangers ethics.

In another instance, Egyptian authorities slammed the media for what they claimed were "overplayed" reports of attacks on activists opposing last week's referendum on adopting a new system for presidential elections.

Witnesses said activists who urged a boycott of the referendum were beaten, kicked and punched by the ruling party's henchmen. These incidents were widely reported in Arab, Western and Egyptian opposition media. And yet the government said the reports, over which Human Rights Watch called for an investigation, were exaggerated.

How do journalists use their judgment in covering such incidents? Is there a playbook or do they operate based on their instincts and the heat of the moment?

At the second media ethics conference organized by the Institute for Professional Journalists – we've since had a third – a former correspondent from Australia who now teaches journalism said you can't do ethics in 250th of a second, the time it takes to shoot a standard picture.

But what of the unseen pictures? Is it ethical to hold back on them?

Images of thousands of dead American soldiers helped turn the tide against the Vietnam War. To avoid a repeat of that, the Pentagon has banned photojournalists from covering the funerals of U.S. troops, or the return of caskets aboard military transport planes at Dover Air Force base in Delaware.

On the other hand, how much does one dwell on tragedy? Is a kidnap victim's pleas for mercy worth extensive coverage?

Covering trauma and tragedy requires special care, sensitivity, professionalism, guts, instincts, empathy, sympathy, courage, stamina and every possible human emotion known to us.

The tsunami disaster was a perfect example. The figures alone of how many people perished were the first and greatest challenge. You want to be accurate fast and ahead of the competition. You face daunting obstacles, communications are difficult, and victims seek you for help.

What do you do? Help a victim or film him in his hour of misery, or both? An analysis of that story said reporters were slow to act in covering it and left us wanting more. It added that international journalism may have missed an opportunity to provide something the countless tsunami stories largely lacked: context.

On a smaller scale, let's take the example of the Terry Schiavo case where the whole world watched as this incapacitated woman died a slow death as a result of euthanasia. How ethical was the method of her death? How ethical was the coverage? Are there rules covering such tragedies? How does one prepare for them?

On the cyber front, publishers are protesting the fact that Google, the Internet search engine, plans to scan millions of library books into its Web index, in what critics called a "systematic infringement of copyright on a massive scale."

According to an Associated Press report, two unidentified publishers have asked Google to withhold their copyrighted materials from such scanning, but the company has so far ignored the requests. That raises the question of whether the Internet, a great resource and repository of information, is being abused as a violator of copyrights and as a medium for the promulgation of offensive materials.

We've also suffered from copyright infringements in the Arab world, and media have been complicit in this in print and online. Will the Arabic Google search engine become a vehicle for published materials without taking copyrights into account? Does that apply to books as well as articles? Where does one draw the line in defense of freedom of information?

Equally offensive, I think, is the barring of material under the pretext of protecting morality when in fact it could serve the common good. Gulf News ran a special report in February entitled "Isn't it time to stop kidding?"

It was referring to the blocking of sites by the UAE's government-run Etisalat communications company. It seems plastic surgeons wishing to do Web research about reconstructing women's breasts and downloading pictures for a medical conference hit a dead end and got a message stating it was "due to content being inconsistent with the religious, cultural, political and moral values of the United Arab Emirates."

So much for media and Internet cities and freedom to learn.

Over the years we've also faced double standards in Arab media when referring to news sources for our reports. If the source is foreign, like The New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, or the BBC, it's been given more weight than a story from a local paper or network.

That may be symptomatic of how little faith Arabs have in their own governments, and, by extension, Arab media, although I must say Arab satellite channels have come a long way in providing us with needed supplements to Western media coverage.

It's not ideal, but it's an improvement on the past. We need to raise the standards further.

Recommendations:

If we're facing such problems on all fronts one would imagine we need strict rules or codes of ethics to keep us on the straight and narrow. Yes and no.

Our institute has had three media ethics conferences focusing on the need to improve news coverage through more ethical journalistic behavior. But the word code, as mentioned earlier, is not something we encourage because it suggests laws that are imposed by governments that are themselves often quite unethical.

That's why we preferred coming up with what we called "guidelines for good journalistic practice" and limited them to a simple set of eight so that journalists can remember them and abide by them voluntarily. We're also working on employers to convince them that by adopting these guidelines it's not only good PR, it's good business.

The eight points are available in the downloadable proceedings from our conference last June on our institute's website and can be summarized as: **fairness, integrity, honesty, commitment to the public, courage to pursue the truth, awareness of diversity, solidarity with fellow journalists treated unjustly and skill development through continuous training.**

I'd like to add the following 10 questions journalists should ask to make good ethical decisions. They were submitted by Bob Steele of the Poynter Institute in Florida, which is a great school for professional journalists.

1. What do I know? What do I need to know?
2. What is my journalistic purpose?
3. What are my ethical concerns?
4. What organizational policies and professional guidelines should I consider?
5. How can I include other people, with different perspectives and diverse ideas, in the decision-making process?
6. Who are the stakeholders – those affected by my decision? What are their motivations? Which are legitimate?

7. What if the roles were reversed? How would I feel if I were in the shoes of one of the stakeholders?
8. What are the possible consequences of my actions? Short term? Long term?
9. What are my alternatives to maximize my truth-telling responsibility and minimize harm?
10. Can I clearly and fully justify my thinking and my decision? To my colleagues? To the stakeholders? To the public?

In all of this it also helps to be armed with a dose of humility. Journalists are conduits through which the story is told. They should not, ideally, become the story.

Conclusion:

While we don't want cowardice in the newsroom from journalists unable or unwilling to take bold steps to tell the story, we also don't appreciate cowboy reporters being parachuted into dicey news situations with the sensitivity of a bulldozer, shoving microphones and cameras into people's faces asking crude questions, or correspondents padding their salaries with gifts and money from sources they cover as clear examples of conflict of interest, or editors using headlines and terminology that parrot official pronouncements in mindless unison.

After all, descriptions put forth by Tom Engelhardt in Mother Jones magazine last August and others in Western media like "rogue cleric," "axis of evil," "outlaws," "renegades," "Islamic terrorists," "puppets," "patrons," "masters," "widespread insurrection," "fiery leader," and other groupthink adjectives are very misleading, particularly since the originators from whom they're parroted may not be much better. So who sets the standards?

In closing, I'd like to remind my Arab media colleagues that we should temper our calls for press freedom to report with a heavy dose of responsibility. Should kidnappings and beheadings define the news? In our eagerness to fill the 24-hour news cycle, where do we draw the line between news and sensationalism? Do we have the luxury of time to decide?

Self-regulation is the best solution, but it should be adopted widely and voluntarily. If regulation is imposed, it could backfire and be counter-productive.

Thank you.

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