DEFINING JOURNALISM ETHICS

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WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- To enable journalists reacquaint themselves with the necessary knowledge of journalism ethics.
- To enable journalists develop their own set of moral philosophy through critically examining moral arguments and principles presented by various philosophers.
Workshop Objectives

- To enable them develop tools of analysis that would help them in making sound judgments and rational decisions when faced with ethical problems or dilemmas.

- To enable them share with one another their personal experiences on ethical challenges and dilemmas.
DEFINING ETHICS

“The goal of ethics is not to make ethical judgments with which everyone agrees but to increase our ability to defend our critical judgments on some rational basis.” DAY
Defining Ethics

- Ethics is such a complex subject that it can hardly be adequately defined by single-sentence definitions. The great moral philosophers throughout history have not agreed on many aspects of ethics or on the main theories and sub-theories of ethics. Most scholars define ethics as a branch of philosophy, which deals with the study of moral behavior, its underlying moral principles and rational justifications.
What could ethics be?

- “Ethics is an extremely important branch of philosophy because it directs our attention not only to human morality but to values in general. Moral philosophy raises questions such as: Are there standards that ought to govern all human behaviour?

- If so, how can we know what they are? Even if we know there are such ethical standards, why should we follow them, especially if they seem not to be in our own self-interest?
What is ethics?

- In general what makes something good or bad? Is there any common property that makes a chocolate cake good but that also makes a lawnmower good?

- Or is goodness simply a feeling people have of liking or wanting something? What makes an action wrong?
? Is it the same thing that makes lying wrong, which also makes failure to help a friend wrong? Aristotle long ago, pointed out that when we talk about something being good or bad we usually mean whether it satisfies the purpose for which it was made.
More on ethics

- Ethics involves critical reflection on and self-confrontation with the moral choices that arise everyday. In other words, if a journalist thinks twice before suppressing a story of public interest, or if she goes ahead to suppress it without a second thought, the results of her decisions reflect her level of conformity to ethics.
More on ethics

- Ethics is also defined as rules of conduct or principles of morality that point us towards the right or best way to act in a situation.

- Journalism ethics on the other hand, is concerned with making rational judgments as well as sound moral decisions in daily journalistic performance. Quite often journalists are confronted with dilemmas out of which they have to make quick decisions to meet deadlines.
Merrill on why ethics:

- First, journalists should be concerned because the people they write for are concerned. Their publics have expectations regarding the kind of journalism that is ethical. In other words, they want journalism that is dependable, credible, truthful, balanced, unbiased, thoughtful, interpretative, considerate, empathetic, and realistic. No matter how difficult it is to achieve these, Merrill argues, but journalists have to bear in mind that these are the expectations of the public.
Merrill on why care:

- Second, journalists have to be ethical because they need *self-respect* and the sense of satisfaction that comes with doing what one thinks is right. Journalists have to live with themselves as well as with other people.
The emphasis on personal development has been stressed from the time of the ancient philosophers up to the present. The Indian Mahatma Gandhi emphasized that a person’s good habits are the key to an ethical life, and that one cannot really reform society or others without first being reformed from within one’s self.
ETHICAL THEORIES

Various scholars classify ethical theories differently; but the most common classification has Deontological Ethics, Teleological Ethics, and Subjective or Individualistic Ethics.
Ethical Theories

• Deontological Ethical Theory
  - Deontologists disagree that results or consequences should be the only measure of whether an act is ethical or unethical.
  - Deontologists believe in rules or principles based on reason, which provide stability and predictability in the moral order. Immanuel Kant is identified with this class of thinkers because of his emphasis on established sets of rules or maxims that would guarantee predictability of ethical behaviour.
Theories

• Teleological Ethical Theory

This class of theory simply emphasise the need to consider consequences of a choice or action before making a decision or judgement. It is sometimes identified with utilitarianism, which seeks to promote what is best for the greatest number, or for all concerned. In other words, a person who is trying to decide what to do attempts first to predict what the consequences will be if A is done instead of B. (Altruists and egoists)
• **Personalistic or Subjective Ethics**

This theory borrows its justification from the argument that an individual has the kind of moral sense that nudges him or her toward right action – call it conscience, instinct, intuition, emotion, mystical insight, or spiritual guidance. The leading thinkers in this theory considered non-rational, spontaneous and individualistic include Kierkegaard, C.S. Lewis, K. Jaspers and Nietzsche.

James Wilson (1993) calls the moral sense – something genetic or biological, something that is intuitive or directly felt ... about how we ought to act when one is free to act voluntarily. Subjective ethical theorists, therefore, place the individual at the centre of responsibility.
Sources of Values and Attitudes

- Parents
- Peer groups
- Role Models
- Cultural norms, religion, education, politics, economic mode
- Genes?
The moral agent's responsibility consists of giving each set of loyalties its share of attention before rendering an ethical determination. Below are six categories of individuals and groups to which we are obligated:
Married to many husbands

- Individual conscience
- Objects of moral judgment
- Financial supporters
- The institution
- Professional colleagues
- Society
For instance,

- Journalists have contractual duties as employees;
- they have professional duties as journalists;
- They have duties of responsibility to sources, the public, etc.
- It follows that the journalist's obligation to choose how he or she performs his or her work may depend on whom he or she feels most loyalty towards: the reader, the employer, and so on.
Traits of a good Political Journalist

- Truthful, honesty and reliable;
- Interest in people at all levels;
- Ability to deal with people across the board;
- Ability to inspire confidence in people;
- Sense of responsibility;
- Driven by nothing but public as well as national interests);
- Tolerance and perseverance;
- Broad interest and wide knowledge on the rules of the political game and political players;
Good political journalist...

- Knowledge of the Constitution of the URT and Zanzibar;
- Knowledge of the functions of the House of Representatives;
- Knowledge of rules and procedures under which the HR conducts its business;
- The political environment (internally and externally) and of social forces at play (e.g., state of the economy and influence of donors);
- Knowledge of individual political actors, such as the President, Speaker, Members of the House of representatives, etc.;
- Knowledge of all the Members in the HR, their profiles, correct details of their CVs, e.g., names, titles, gender, age, education, constituency, political convictions, etc.
Society and communities have their own ideals and morality. Their expectation is that social institutions, media included, would promote those ideals and morals through a system that guarantees understanding and harmony and which, respects rights and freedoms of individuals through justice, tolerance, restraint and solidarity.
Tanzania Code of Ethics defines a journalist as:

A journalist is a person trained on how to professionally collect and process news and information for use by the mass media, and whose livelihood depends to a greater extent on income from those activities. This would include people working as reporters who collect news and information by using either notebooks, cameras of various formats, tape recorders and commentators of live events.
Defining a journalist...

- Others are editors, newspaper designers, cartoonists, scriptwriters, producers and presenters. In addition, they are people who observe, defend and share a dedication to truth and accuracy, fairness, independence, and moral integrity.
TRUTH AND ACCURACY

- Journalists must seek to keep the good faith of readers by assuring them that the news is accurate, free from bias, and that all sides are presented fairly.
- Always provide a truthful and comprehensive account of events in a fair and honest manner.
- Seek subjects of news stories and allegations and give them the opportunity to respond as a matter of right.
Truth and Accuracy…

- Press and broadcasting media must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.
- Where a significant inaccuracy, misleading or distorted statement is published it must be corrected promptly with due prominence and, where appropriate, an apology.
- Publishers and broadcasters should report fairly the result of any legal action brought against them and have an obligation to publish in full any critical adjudication made against them by the Media Council.
RIGHT OF REPLY

- The press or broadcasting organization has an obligation to give a fair opportunity to reply to any individual or organization, which the newspaper or broadcasting organization itself attacks editorially.
OBJECTIVITY AND FAIRNESS

- One of the cardinal rules in journalism is the realisation that there is almost always another side to a story. A professional journalist, therefore, has the obligation to present balanced and comprehensive information. They look not only at two, but at all sides of a subject;

- Find sources who will help you get a whole rounded picture of an issue of event. Consider the following:
Fairness…

- What people are affected by the problem? The victims, users, members, mothers, workers, etc.; in other words winners and losers;
- What parties have a professional or vested interest in the outcome of the matter at hand. They may have a real and legitimate interest in the issue and can often articulate the problem quite clearly;
- What do independent experts on the subject say. People not involved in the issue or controversy, but who have a scientific approach and can give a reliable perspective.
Fairness…

- Be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information accurately;
- Seek out and disseminate competing perspectives without being unduly influenced by those who would use their power or position to counter the public interest;
- Avoid being a fanatic of a sport, religious, political or sectarian association or organisation as they may compromise your independence. If you must, then avoid personally covering their activities;
- Be compassionate for those affected by your story;
- Treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving respect, not merely as means to your journalistic ends.
DEGENCY AND GOOD TASTE

- Journalists are enjoined to have good taste in the words and illustrations they use. In such a story as fire, accident or sex the decision over what details to include involves more than just newsworthiness.

- There is a factor of human sensitivity; the sensitivity of those who are caught up perhaps inadvertently in the news itself and the sensitivity of others whose lives may be affected by the way the story is handled. Show good taste and avoid lurid curiosity.

- Journalists have an obligation to protect the morals of children. They should therefore avoid the showing, or promotion, of violence, obscenity and immoral acts. You should then consider the relevance, importance or usefulness of any details that are to be published or aired.
Money, gifts and freebies (mshiko) are normally given in expectation of favourable coverage. *Mshiko* ranges from the most trivial to the most comprehensive;

The bottom line is that the journalist shall regard as grave professional misconduct the acceptance of a bribe in any form in consideration of either publication or suppression of information.
Code of Ethics adapted by MCT says:

A journalist should not solicit or accept bribes or any form of inducement meant to bend or influence professional performance.

But research in Tanzania shows that journalists find it difficult to refuse offers of gifts and rides, because of:

- Poverty, including poor working environment
- Low pay
- Late payments of salaries to employed journalists and for stories to correspondents.
- Lack of facilities e.g. means of transport and money for faxes or telephone calls.
Publication or broadcasting of information, including pictures, about the private lives or concerns of individuals without consent is acceptable only if a serious legitimate public interest outweighs their normal human right of privacy or where the material concerned ought to be published in the public interest which outweighs the normal human right of privacy.
Entry into public life does not disqualify individuals from the right to privacy except where circumstances of such private affairs are likely to affect their performance of, or fitness for, the public roles they hold or seek.

The overriding public interest relied upon in this and other clauses of the Code may include: detection or exposure of crime, protection of public health and safety and preventing the public from being seriously misled on an important matter by a public statement or action of an individual or institution.
HARASSMENT AND PURSUIT

- Undercover and surreptitious methods to get information from sources are not permissible unless conventional means have failed, and the information is of high public interest. When used it has to be explained so in the story;

- Journalists and broadcasters must not seek interviews, information or pictures by intimidation, harassment or persistent pursuit.
Nor should they invade individuals’ privacy by deception, eavesdropping or covert technological means unless the material sought ought to be published in the public interest and could not be obtained in any other way.
Avoid discriminatory and derogatory stereotyping information or depiction by race, creed, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, gender orientation, geography, physical endowment or social status.

Avoid comics and jokes about physical or mental disability and real-life tragedy, which might be painful.
Be extra careful when making jokes based on race, religion, sex or age.

As a rule, use gender-sensitive language.

Do not identify people by ethnicity or colour.

Be sensitive to the rights and dignities of the disabled.

Do not bring into the open someone’s sexuality.
Families of criminals should not be implicated in wrongdoing or guilt because of association.

Journalists, press and broadcasting organisations should generally avoid identifying relations of persons convicted or accused of crime unless the connection is directly relevant to the matter reported.
Avoid casual use of words considered holy by believers.

Journalists and broadcasters should approach and refer to religious bodies in a balanced, fair and seemly manner, recognising the respect and reverence in which they, their representatives and their beliefs are likely to be held by adherents.
PERSONAL INTERESTS

- Resist at all costs undue influence from outside sources, including owners, advertisers, story subjects, powerful individuals and interest groups;
- Journalists of all media should not allow personal or family interest to influence them in their professional duties;
- They should not allow themselves to be influenced by any consideration, gift or advantage offered to them, or by advertising or other commercial considerations;
- Avoid being a member to any organization whose activities are the subject of your coverage.
CONFIDENTIALITY

- Never as a rule disclose sources of information given in confidence unless required so by a legal process.
- Journalists of all media have a moral obligation to protect confidential sources of information, and to respect confidences willingly accepted in the course of their occupation.
CENSORSHIP

- Never suppress useful information unless it is in the public interest.
- Government may ask you to withhold publication of story until government has investigated the problem or acted on it. Sometimes you may have access to information on security matters. In such situations, exercise caution, but don’t hold back stories that protect government officers, not country.
Never falsely identify yourself to gain access to persons or places and then write stories on the experience.
A number of journalists have stood trial in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, accused of fanning the Tutsi-Hutu conflict which left an estimated 800,000 people dead in 1994.

Seven years later a section of the press in the US was blamed for widespread civil attack on turbaned and bearded men. It followed the bombing of buildings in New York and Washington by suicide hijackers who appeared to be of Arab origin.

Journalists should avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to a persons’ colour, religion, or sex.

Journalists should avoid fanning ethnicity, race, political, religious or communal differences.
Some stories or press releases are embargoed or issued to the media days or weeks ahead of the date of official publication. This is normally done to enable simultaneous release of information over a large geographical area.
ETHICS IN COVERING HR

- Always observe time;
- Always make appointments for interviews with Members of HR or Speaker;
- Always crosscheck facts and figures with MHR or official HR records;
- Avoid sensationalising issues or blowing small squabbles out of proportion;
- Avoid focusing on the negatives only (such as dozing MHRs);
References:

- Mencher, Melvin; *Basic News Writing*, Universal Book Stall, New Delhi 1997
- MCT Codes of Ethics for Media Professionals,
- Society of Professional Journalists - Code of Ethics
References:

- Radio-Television News Directors Association: Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct
- IFJ - Code of Ethics for Journalists
- Fiji Code of Ethics
- Rioba & Karashani: To Write or Not to Write; Ethical Concerns in Journalism.