

A CODE OF ETHICS FOR CITIZEN JOURNALISM

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In the brave new world of digital communications, in which more people than at any time in history can make public their views and opinions, what credible role can be assigned to citizen journalism?

The *Handbook for Citizen Journalists* (Ross and Cormier, 2010) offers the following comment: “The work of citizen journalists may not reach the heights of social or spiritual impact as the great men and women of history, but make no mistake, it is extremely important to the preservation of democracy. The basic principles of journalism – objective reporting, detachment from personal bias, a commitment to the truth and more – are needed today more than ever in history. These principles applied by well-meaning, truth-seeking citizen journalists across the nation and around the world will increase public knowledge, improve public trust and expand public discourse.”

Citizen journalism can provide a useful way for news media to add needed voices to an increasingly fragmented and polarised media landscape by promoting “engaged dialogue” – one that involves a willingness to listen to what other people are saying and how they see the world. In this respect, citizen journalism can challenge the conventional role of mainstream news media.

Adam Kahane (2004) calls this process “deep conversation”. The premise is simple: “The way we talk and listen expresses our relationship with the world. When we fall into the trap of telling and of not listening, we close ourselves off from being changed by the world and we limit ourselves to being able to change the world only by force. But when we talk and listen with an open mind and an open heart and an open spirit, we bring forth our better selves and a better world”.

Engaged dialogue as practised by citizen journalists has profound implications for the creators and shapers of news and opinion. While most newsrooms continue to struggle with questions of diversity – a struggle that certainly must continue – citizen journalists can quickly increase gender, ethnic and social balance. They can offer to a story relevant specialist knowledge as well as valuable lived experience.

That being said, early experience suggests that not every public communicator will abide by professional codes of journalistic practice and most will not benefit from the long-term professional infrastructure of the best media institutions. The problem for their different audiences will be to sift fact from fiction, insight from partisan opinion, truth from falsehood. If they are to win and keep the trust of editors and the public, citizen journalists will need to spend considerable time verifying, interpreting and explaining their stories.

The question is: what kind and to what extent can traditional journalism ethics be applied to citizen media and citizen journalism? Writing in the series “Challenges” published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, John Kelly (2009) observes that citizen journalism’s supporters claim six ways it benefits public communication. It brings experts into the reporting process so that stories can be more accurate and nuanced; it makes possible the coverage of events that the mainstream media might otherwise miss, and it can save money. Through blogs especially, it can influence the news agenda or “resuscitate” stories that mainstream media might have let die; it can demystify the journalistic process and it can build a sense of community, increasing the understanding of,

and participation in, civic life (Kelly 2009).

Citizen journalists equipped with accessible and affordable digital technologies may provide a valuable service to news consumers and to the news media, but only if they reconcile themselves with the ethical standards of professional journalism. At the same time, while some public communicators may feel called to become professional journalists, one might hope that most would not jeopardise the specificity and authenticity of their voices by doing so.

Alan Rusbridger, editor of *The Guardian*, extols what he calls open journalism – “journalism that is fully knitted into the web of information that exists in the world today. It links to it; sifts and filters it; collaborates with it and generally uses the ability of anyone to publish and share material to give a better account of the world” (Rusbridger 2012).

Rusbridger set out 10 principles of open journalism:

- It encourages participation. It invites and/or allows a response.
- It is not an inert, “us” or “them”, form of publishing.
- It encourages others to initiate debate, publish material or make suggestions.
- It helps form communities of joint interest around subjects, issues or individuals.
- It is open to the web and is part of it.
- It aggregates and/or curates the work of others.
- It recognises that journalists are not the only voices of authority, expertise and interest.
- It aspires to achieve, and reflect, diversity as well as promoting shared values.
- It recognises that publishing can be the beginning of the journalistic process rather than the end.
- It is transparent and open to challenge – including correction, clarification and addition.

It is in this context that on World Press Freedom Day 2012 the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) urged media practitioners – including both professional and citizen journalists – to seek common ground for their joint efforts and to agree principles and practices that are transparent, accountable and ethical (WACC, 2012). A code of ethics for citizen journalism would provide a much needed framework for new voices working to transform societies and establish standards for a multiplicity and diversity of voices that can only advance the cause of communication for all.

References

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