Media Accountability: Setting Standards for Journalism and Democracy

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This meeting takes place at a time of profound crisis for everyone who works in the world of journalism. Our industry, our ways of working, our relations with the people we serve are in a state of tumult.

In the last few months I have met and discussed the impact of this crisis with groups of journalists, academics, media support groups, and policymakers on every continent. Everywhere the discussion poses the same question – what is the future for journalism?

Those who ask the question in Europe and North America do so in the midst of a desperate search for new market models as traditional media grapple with the loss of audience and circulation as users and advertisers migrate to new Internet platforms. In the US alone 60,000 media jobs have disappeared in the last two years.

In the Middle East they have the additional obstacles of increasing governmental interference and forms of judicial intimidation.

In Latin America, they ask the question as media are stifled by excessive media concentration, political indifference, newsroom corruption and a tide of violence that renders independent journalism virtually impossible.

In Africa the twin threats of poverty and social dislocation add to the mix of problems that face journalism and independent media.

Here in Asia the whole basket of problems is brought into play. None of us can ignore the reality of the terrible events in Philippines just ten days ago when, in the biggest single act of political violence against journalism in history, 31 of our colleagues were brutally murdered.

This did not happen in isolation. It happened because of a collapse in respect for the rule of law; because journalists were trying to do their jobs; because media are ever-more powerful in the information age; and it happened because there is a culture of impunity and too little respect for the value of information pluralism in society.

This tragic event could have just as easily have occurred in Somalia, in Mexico, in Sri Lanka or in the lawless territories of central Asia.

It is a reminder that our discussions today should not be seen as some idle conversation about the theories of journalism or social communication. Instead we need to put the whole issue of media accountability in its proper context in this turbulent era – a challenge, but also an opportunity to reinforce the cause of democracy and the rights of citizens.

This meeting has its roots in conflict. A few years ago the cartoons crisis in Denmark sparked a confrontation that with a little toxic politics turned into a global confrontation over free
expression rights and the role of media in reporting the affairs of diverse communities in society.

As that confrontation raged journalists in Europe and the Middle East began to discuss how to respond. Meetings were held in Brussels and Oslo and the governments of Norway and Indonesia embarked upon a compelling effort to break the logjam of misunderstanding exposed by publication of the pictures of the Prophet Mohammed.

A three-year programme of dialogue under the umbrella of the Global Inter-Media Dialogue was launched, bringing together media people from communities steeped in very different religious and cultural traditions to unpick the knots of hostility and to challenge the ignorance and prejudice that was unleashed in those days.

One outcome from that process is the Ethical Journalism Initiative, launched by the IFJ this year. This Initiative aims to reinforce standards in media, to promote the value of journalism as a public good, and to encourage journalists to recommit themselves to the ethical traditions of their craft.

This campaign is launched already in the Middle East and Europe. It is being launched in Africa and Latin America next year.

At this meeting we want to explore and develop one of the key ethics of journalism – accountability. This is one of four key ethics that shape the work of journalists. The other three – truth-telling, independence and responsibility to the people we serve – are deeply embedded in our traditions.

But making ourselves accountable, owning up to our mistakes and revealing our frailties to the outside world is not something journalists ever find easy. There is nothing that journalists like better than exposing the hypocrisy of politicians, the corruption that is rife in the world of business and the frailties of celebrity – spare a thought if you will in these difficult days for Tiger Woods.

But while journalists relish dishing out punishment to society’s sinners and big-shots, they are notoriously thin skinned when it comes to admitting their own mistakes. The failure of media to be open and accountable is rightly identified as a symptom of arrogance and complacency.

It is I believe one of the fundamental reasons why public trust in media and journalism has been lost. It also explains why the use of the Internet to expose the editorial atrocities, hypocrisy and multiple errors of traditional media has spread like wildfire in recent years.

The traditional media accountability system, involving administration of an agreed code of practice and investigation of complaints from members of the public about media content, is under pressure because of the technological changes in the industry and the new ways that people receive and disseminate information.

Media accountability to be effective must be about the defence of press freedom not defence of the press yet many of the existing self-regulating press councils in the world have their
roots in campaigns to avoid governmental legislation against the press. That has often created the impression that these press councils are self serving.

Today we will test this observation by making a case study of one council – that operating in Indonesia, which in our Ethical Journalism Initiative book we identified as an innovative model.

Media accountability in whatever form it comes must balance the rights of the individual and the community and the rights of the press to free expression. It must be framed in the notion that both the freedom and the regulation are indispensable if we want news media to provide citizens with the service they need to be informed participants in democratic life.

Accountability should also be based upon the principle of self-rule. That is why many press councils and media commissions are set up by the media themselves. But to be credible and to build public confidence they must operate with a high degree of independence from media and provide a set of rules under which people featured in the news media can complain if something is inaccurate, intrusive or unfair. They must also be open to participation from the communities that media serve.

In short, a media accountability system needs to serve a number of purposes. I can identify at least seven:

1. To advocate journalistic independence and media freedom in society
2. To promote the right of the public to be informed
3. To campaign for conditions that will enable journalists to serve their public better,
4. To foster better understanding within society at all levels about the role played by independent journalism in democratic life
5. To support journalists in their work and to encourage professional solidarity
6. To mediate complaints from the public in a transparent service, free of charge and to provide remedies for unethical conduct by journalists
7. To help build trust between journalists and the public to ensure that media can resist political and economic pressure.

This then, is not a manifesto for policing. It is about mediation, advocacy and education and seeking opportunities for fresh dialogue within society about the work of media and the need to support journalism as a public good.

To make the most of this opportunity we in media have to promote new forms of corporate and professional responsibility which allow people to complain without legal representation and can help generate trust in the quality of news. And we have to do so in the context of a vastly increased public information space and a merged media environment.

The days when press and television could have their news content subject to separate jurisdictions are over. In a converged media system a single stream of journalism is available on different platforms and often from the same newsroom. Traditional models of accountability often applying different models of regulation for press and broadcasting are rendered obsolete by the online world and convergence.
At this meeting we are going to also discuss all of these developments and their impact on our notions of accountability in media. We shall hear from around the table the experience and thoughts of others on a range of related issues.

But as we do so we should remember that it is not our task or indeed our intention to try to come up with a single model for universal application. Media accountability comes in many different forms and is shaped according to national conditions, traditions and customs.

It can involve what we might call the press council system, which relies on co-operation between public and media. But it can also be less complex – it can be an internal system of review and correction in each media house, or it can be the process of national professional reflection (such as the journalism reviews of the United States), it can be found in systematic monitoring and reporting of media activity by concerned NGOs and human rights bodies.

Whatever form of accountability is found, though, it must be transparent, accessible to the public and it must involve the major actors of social communication -- the people who own the power to inform, those who possess the creativity and talent to inform and those who have the right to be informed, that is, media owners, journalists and the public at large.

One key question is that of funding. Who pays for media accountability? Well, it’s a public service and given the complex nature of modern media systems, there is a strong case for public support. But media must also pay their share and any budgetary support from the state or other external support must be provided in a manner that safeguards independence of action and does not allow for governmental or political interference.

We need to think about how we review our systems of accountability at a time when the ground is shifting fast, when we need to take new hopeful steps towards the reinvention and the renewal of journalism that embraces change, welcomes the challenges of diversity, and which protects honest reporting and strengthens our attachment to ethical conduct.

We should not be intimidated by the pace of change, nor indeed by the social and political realities that make journalism so difficult and dangerous in many of the countries we come from. There is promise in the many possibilities that lie before us. Here are some thoughts to put on the table:

**Advocacy:**

The essential role of free and responsible media in building democracy, pluralism and development must be made a primary concern of the public. Only civil society can protect and sustain it. The discussion within media and journalism must be brought to public attention.

Journalists and the public at large need to rethink the role of government in protecting, regulating, and supporting a free and responsible press. The notion that the state has no role to play is one that we have to reconsider. Can we have co-regulation that provides legal protection for self-rule in journalism?
Journalists and civil society must make common cause in calls for removal of all obstacles, legal and otherwise, to the exercise of free and independent journalism whether in public or private media.

**Education:**

Civic programmes based upon media literacy and promotion of public debate about the role of journalism and media can help build a vigorous environment for the future of journalism;

Understanding the potential of new forms of media, and the significance of the engagement of a richer community of people in producing media, is essential to the future of journalism and the enrichment of democracy.

**Professionalism:**

Journalists will be immensely strengthened by seeking a clearer common understanding of ethics and good practices, and a renewal of the mission of news media to act in the public interest;

Media and journalism will be strengthened by more internal transparency and a greater and more genuine commitment to holding themselves accountable;

More responsible corporate governance among media companies is essential if original journalism is to be sustained;

**Mediation:**

People have the right to seek the correction of inaccuracies, falsehoods and opinions based upon malicious or unfounded evidence against them.

Media accountability needs to be applied without discrimination in a transparent, fair and accessible process irrespective if social

We need to put our ideas about accountability into the context of the political and social challenges facing this region but also in the context of the wide discussion now taking place across the globe about how to bring a greater sense of public responsibility to the corporate governance of media.

Traditional media have had their energy entirely drawn to the greedy and unreasonable expectations of the market which has made many of them indifferent to news and therefore to the fundamental purposes served by news and the press. The consequences of that can now been seen in these hard times -- cuts in editorial spending, training, investigative journalism, and employment of trained and skilled reporters.

Commercial media are increasingly incapable of meeting democracy’s needs. But what are the alternatives? One of them is the growing success of the non profit media, particularly public broadcasting. In the United States, for instance, as the giants of the private media have been laid low, National Public Radio, whose funding comes from foundation grants, corporate
grants and sponsorships, and licensing fees, has seen its listenership double in the past ten years. Foundations and other non-governmental subsidies are increasingly playing a role.

However they are employed, and by whom, journalists hold several keys to the fate of their craft. Journalists tend to see their work as a vocation, but their faith in that calling has been badly shaken in recent years. Morale is low. It is hard to do good work when your work is under threat, when the social and professional conditions are scarred by neglect, corruption and interference. The resulting impact on quality of journalism is palpable.

This has added to the long-standing criticism of journalism through the ages that too much media output is a miscellaneous succession of stories and images which have no relation to the typical lives of real people. The result is a meaninglessness, distortion, ignorance and misunderstanding.

So the debate about accountability needs also to consider how journalists work and the pressures that they are under. Journalists are ready to provide the service that democracy and citizens need if the conditions are right.

There is widespread cynicism among many that journalists care little about the moral responsibility of their work. But a study by two researchers, from the Missouri School of Journalism and Louisiana State University, used a test designed to measure reactions to ethical dilemmas with reporters across the United States. This found journalism to be one of the most morally developed professions in the country, behind only medical doctors, media students and theologians.¹

The study revealed that thinking like a journalist involves moral reflection, done at a level that in most instances equals or exceeds members of other learned professions. But does the public think that? Hardly. Indeed, a 2005 poll by the Annenberg Public Policy Center poll of both journalists and the public on media accuracy found that 86 percent of journalists, but only 5 percent, of the public said news media get their facts right.

One clear sign of the lively debate about ethics is the ongoing questioning of the principle of objectivity. Many believe that the degree of detachment that objectivity requires of journalists is an element in its failure. The failure to connect, the lack of commitment and passion in journalism, the lack of engagement with society have all contributed to a disconnection of journalism with its audience and has diminished public trust in media.

Craig Newmark of craigslist voiced what many believe when he said in an Associated Press article: “The reason why newspapers are losing circulation is that too many traditional journalists are willing to quote politicians and business executives even if they’re blatantly lying – merely for the sake of perceived objectivity.”

Former New York Times reporter Doug McGill puts it well: “For more than a century, objectivity has been the dominant professional norm of the news media. It has at its heart the noble aim of presenting indisputable facts upon which everyone in society can agree, and

¹ Report by Geneva Overholser, 2005, Commission on the Role of Press in a Democracy
build upon towards the goal of a better society. Unfortunately, the ideal of objectivity has in
practice in today’s newsrooms become a subtle but powerful means of self-censorship.”

Being dispassionate often feels to consumers like a lack of concern. There is no such lack of
engagement in the online world and a change in the nature of journalism’s commitment to
objectivity is probably coming whether journalists embrace it or not.

Online the tone of journalism is different. There is often more humanity and solidarity. More
partisan, certainly, but more in touch with people’s feelings. As a result, traditional media are
having to rethink their hostility to and rejection of any kind of advocacy journalism.

Journalists can considerably strengthen their own position by doing a better job of holding
themselves accountable and making their work transparent. This movement toward greater
accountability is gathering strength.

In many countries media critics, from alternative weeklies to blogger and media monitoring
groups, are contributing their own kind of accountability to the media climate today, as
are a growing number of journalists covering media in newspapers, magazines and online.

Some media are responding with an increase in transparency about their work and their
activities. A good example is the newspaper I worked on 20-odd years ago the United
Kingdom’s Guardian which conducts an annual “Social, ethical and environmental audit.”

Beyond the need for ethical recommitment and for the kind of transparency and
accountability that can engender trust, there is a new debate about the need for greater
professionalisation in journalism.

This idea is likely give many traditionalists a heart attack, but in the age when the term
“citizen journalist” has come to represent a flood of untrained, uninformed and ill equipped
amateurs into the world of real journalism there is a need to identify exactly who we are
talking about when we use the term “journalist.”

Across Europe and much of the United States there are offices resembling newsrooms, and
in those offices are people who resemble journalists, but they are not engaged in journalism.
This is the world of “content preparation,” feeding material into new information outlets. It is
not journalism because the work does not involve any responsibility to the citizen who
receives the information. There is no commitment to ethical values, no sense of the need to do
no harm, no obligation to be accountable.

This growth of unprofessional, unaccountable information increases public cynicism about
the role of media in society and encourages yet more governmental interference.

Journalists need to distinguish themselves from others through their ethical behaviour and
professionalism, their accountability and transparency. This is not about introducing systems
of licensing, but of revisiting ways of ensuring that the people who do journalism for a living
are competent, trained, informed and aware of their responsibilities.

If journalism is to survive, it falls to individual journalists to articulate what it stands
for. Journalists need to reinvent their social contract with the public whether through professionalisation or a recommitment to mission, an agreement on core standards or enhanced accountability.

Part of that contract must be, says the IFJ, a commitment on the part of journalists to speak out on behalf of journalism and to stand up for their profession. There are already plenty of others willing to speak about journalism. Media critics abound. Politicians hasten to blame the messenger and promptly pass oppressive laws to keep journalists in check.

The welcome flowering of transparency and accountability needs to be accompanied by a growth in explanation and context. The only real hope for sustaining journalism over the long haul is going to lie in the public demand for good work – but the public must first believe in the necessity of it, and then in the possibility of it.

We all need to do a better job of persuading the public that freedom of information is not a media privilege but a key part of what keeps other freedoms alive for all.

Journalism matters, whether it is talking about those who die in war zones, or exposing crooks in government or corruption in business. But if journalists don’t tell these stories, who will?

In answering this question we have to dispense with the reflex prejudice from some in journalism that government cannot help us to find solutions to our problems, including meeting our responsibilities to be accountable.

The promotion of media literacy is a public duty that requires public spending. We need to encourage people, particularly the young, to engage with media and generally to encourage citizens to exercise their rights to be informed of the affairs of the state.

Some citizens are already transforming the news by supporting new forms of media. Web-based opportunities are being used everywhere – in all countries, no matter how authoritarian and oppressive the government.

There are many forms of innovation promoting a pace of change unsettling to the traditional world of journalism. Many of these new lights are so-called citizen journalists. They have a place in the public information space but they cannot replace the need for professional journalists.

While the formlessness of citizen journalism allows for people to write as they consider fit to tell the story, it has also created a form of information chaos. Significantly, these so-called journalists do not have to adhere to standards or ethics, and are free to purvey information which has not undergone a filtering process to determine accuracy of content. This work is better described as ‘citizens’ voice’ because it is largely the preserve of the individual to define standards of telling the truth of the matter as closely as possible.

But those that do aspire towards journalism are moving towards us. New media that rely on networks of bloggers are getting more obsessed with accuracy. They’re also more skilful at backing up their opinions with reporting and research. Simply put, they’re investing more in getting the story right, the goal of every journalist worthy of the name.
Through a conscious awareness of objectivity, accuracy, corroboration, and editorial oversight - concepts that lie at the heart of professional journalism – bloggers and others can increase the integrity of their work, and win the trust of readers and audience.

One example of this movement towards awareness of the need for accountability is the actions of Ground Report, a world news platform that combines digital reporting tools and a network of reporters, to power what it calls the best global citizen journalism.

This successful outlet, set up by former UN journalists Rachel Sterne, imposes a regime of editorial management that is founded on principles of professionalism. Reporters submit articles, photos or videos of news events, which are vetted to publication by journalists. Once verified the material is published instantly to an audience of millions through its site and syndication partners. This new media site provided original coverage of Tibetan protests over last year’s Beijing Olympics; More than 100 local updates from the Mumbai terrorists attacks; and Coverage of the Iranian election protest

Every news item is editorially vetted prior to publication. Only contributors with proven, internal fact-checking policies get instant publication. The aim is to ensure that every news item is credible and true, that copyright rules are followed, that the content is not offensive, that it is not commercial, and that there is transparency to avoid conflicts of interests.

Altogether it sounds like a modern and updated form of journalism. All it needs now is a form of accountability that will build public trust.

Having said all of this, the challenges of this meeting are to find ways of influencing the politicians in the Bali Democracy Forum. In some of the countries present pressure on media is routine, impunity is rampant, and some political leaders remain unconvinced that free media and independent journalism can be an asset in the struggle for development and nation-building.

We can and should send a message that at its best journalism can be a driving force of change, building confidence in society and opening the door to new and dynamic forms of democratic exchange. That is why I hope we can provide some positive ideas that will put notions of accountability in media in their proper perspective – that accountability is about building a culture of respect for democracy and not as many leaders still seem to think as an opportunity for controlling media and penalising challenging journalism.

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