

Every form of moral life . . . depends on education.

Michael Oakeshott

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on Tuesday 11 September, 2001 horrified the world. Three passenger-filled planes were used to crash into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; another plane, headed for a target in Washington, came down outside Pittsburgh, thwarted by the action of passengers. Thousands of people were murdered on a particularly horrifying day in the blood-soaked history of terrorism. The following day the ten British national newspapers sold 15 million copies, 2.5 million more than usual. In many areas it was impossible to buy a broadsheet paper after midday.

Analysing the newspapers' performance a week later, *The Guardian* media commentator wrote: 'Journalism was properly fulfilling its task, telling us what it is like to live and to die on the day New York caught fire' (Greenslade, 17 September, 2001). In the same piece *The Times*' editor, Peter Stothard, said: 'Journalists are often criticized but they can take great satisfaction at telling this story so well and so sensitively'.

The Guardian's analysis of the reporting of that terrible September day included the views of most national editors. The consensus was that reporters and editors had done their job well by producing accurate, comprehensive, in-depth, fast and sensitive coverage. On these criteria the standard of reporting had been good if not excellent. Do these criteria help us to establish a baseline for determining good journalism from an ethical standpoint?

Professionalism

I think they do. Virtuous journalism is also virtuous journalism. We saw in earlier chapters that being good is also about knowing *how* to be good. As Meyer suggested, achieving competent journalism – reporting which is accurate, for example – is a necessary first step to it being ethical (1991). If you cannot rely on what you read or what you see, how can the reporting be, in any meaningful sense, 'good'? Ethically good journalism begins with competent reporting.

Professional goals

What is journalism for? This is perhaps the area where there will be the greatest difference of opinion. There are a number of different journalistic traditions:

local and national reporting; tabloid and broadsheet journalism; western and developmental journalism; objective and peace journalism. Reporters from these traditions might variously reply that journalism is for fostering national development; scrutinizing the powerful; contributing to peace; revealing the virtues and vices of the rich and famous and giving the people what they want. Is good journalism also about successfully achieving the goals of the particular tradition in which we might work?

If we think back to some of the issues we have discussed in previous chapters, the answer to this has to be no. There are some journalistic traditions which straightforwardly encourage bad journalism because they countenance lying, distortion, voyeurism, the promotion of prejudice and hatred. For journalism to be good, it must have good aims. These could include:

- The provision of information
- The scrutiny of the powerful
- Providing a voice for all sectors of society
- The revelation of injustice

Aquinas makes a number of useful distinctions which help in understanding how to judge the goodness of actions.¹ First, we should look at the kind of action it is: on the whole, saving life is better than destroying it; providing information is better than not. Second, the goal of the action should be taken into account. If I publish information in order to inspire hatred of a minority group, then my action is in no way good. A third source of goodness, says Aquinas, is in relation to my judgement of whether what I do is right or wrong. If I do something which I believe to be wrong, in those circumstances it is wrong to do it. It is a source of badness in my action in the sense that I am doing something which I consider wrong. As Philippa Foot says, 'acting as one thinks one should not is a very radical form of badness in the will. How could a human being be acting well in doing what he or she saw as evil?' (2001: 74). So, if I'm asked to do something which I sincerely and clearly believe to be bad, then I simply shouldn't do it. Of course, I might be mistaken. I might have what Aquinas calls an 'erring conscience', an important matter to which I shall return shortly.

Character

Professionalism – understood as accurate, sensitive, comprehensive and fast coverage – and the kind of professional goals which aim to do good for the right reasons, don't just happen. Reporting of the terrorist attacks on the United States required immense hard work; determination; news sense; fascination with every aspect of the story (curiosity); attention to detail; a sense of urgency; imagination and sensitivity. It also required a consciousness that the media was performing a public service for all British citizens. Without these qualities – virtues – coverage could have been mawkish, careless, xenophobic or prurient.

That it largely was not is a tribute to the responsibility and good judgement of editors and reporters.² If these kinds of qualities are habitually exercised, then they are indeed virtues and help produce high-class journalism.

Character is also key to good journalism. According to the journalist, David Randall, almost any intelligent person can, with sufficient effort, be a *competent* reporter. To be a *good* reporter, you must have real talent and flair for either research, or writing, or both. And you should have the right kind of character; for if there is one thing that separates outstanding reporters from the ordinary, it is this' (2000: 8).

As we've seen throughout this book, doing the right thing is a function of who we are. It's no coincidence that an editor makes a good decision about which pictures to broadcast after a major train accident, if he or she has proved to be decisive and responsible in ordinary situations. Most of the time reporters and editors aren't faced with enormously complex moral choices; when they are it will be their habitual behaviour – whether they're brave, foolish, sensitive or uncaring – which will mark the decisions they make. In Oakeshott's words:

... the moral life is a *habit of affection and behaviour*; not a habit of reflective *thought*, but a habit of *affection and conduct*. The current situations of a normal life are met, not by consciously applying to ourselves a rule of behaviour, nor by conduct recognized as the expression of a moral ideal, but by acting in accordance with a certain habit of behaviour. The moral life in this form does not spring from the consciousness of possible alternative ways of behaving and a choice, determined by an opinion, a rule or an ideal, from among these alternatives; conduct is as nearly as possible without reflection. And consequently, most of the current situations of life do not appear as occasions calling for judgement, or as problems requiring solutions; there is no weighing up of alternatives or reflection on consequences, no uncertainty, no battle of scruples. There is, on the occasion, nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up. (*italics in original*; 1991: 468)

This view is reflected in the comment of an American reporter asked about his views on ethics and journalism. He said: 'The few unethical journalists I've known are really flawed people. It's not that they don't follow any codes – they're not interested in codes. They were poorly brought up and did dishonest things' (cited in Goodwin, 1995: 15–16). This might seem to be a counsel of despair. It needn't be. Laws and codes can be effective in creating climates of opinion and control mechanisms to ensure that flawed characters become *professionally* unacceptable. Good character can also be encouraged by a number of measures which I'll discuss at the end of this chapter. Finally, there is always the flickering flame of conscience.

Conscience

I mentioned the matter of conscience earlier and also alluded to it in the previous chapter. What is conscience? It can be thought of as the capacity and sense all

human beings have of knowing what is right and wrong. When we act well we are at peace and when we act badly there is a nagging sense of unease or even dreadful remorse.

This sounds straightforward but of course it isn't in the least. Where someone's conscience tells them it is right to be a suicide bomber or to pay workers starvation wages, then we may wonder whether conscience counts for much. These are situations where we can speak of 'erring consciences' and in these circumstances the people concerned can never act well.

However, the situation where we are entirely certain that a certain course of action, which appears to go against the grain of good conduct, is right is thankfully rare. Usually in difficult circumstances, we will be uncertain as to the right course of action. Should an editor of a local newspaper publish a story and picture of a convicted paedophile who has been hanging around a school, a dilemma faced by the deputy editor of the *Nottingham Evening Post* (cited in Keeble, 2001: 144–5)? Should a journalist betray a source to help convict a terrorist? What should a good journalist do?

According to BBC journalist, John Simpson: 'All you can do is make sure your conscience is as clear as a profession full of compromise and uncertainty will allow it to be' (2000: 325). And the only way to do this is through sincere reflection and the seeking of advice from those wiser and more experienced than we are. In the words of the managing editor of *Time* magazine, Walter Isaacson: 'In the end, you're going to be judged on whether you got it right, not just on whether you got it first' (cited in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, March–April 1998). Conscience is, then, also related to practical wisdom or prudence. Even those with 'flawed' characters will have notions of right and wrong. The key is to find ways of showing them that being a good journalist is also a kind of enlightened self-interest.

A remarkable feature in debates about ethics is that even after 2,500 years, the issues raised by the Greek philosophers continue to speak to us. It is also true, however, that we seem to be living in times of particular ethical complexity. Two issues which might be considered to pose special challenges to the practice of good journalism in the twenty-first century are: first, the questions raised by the development of cyberspace and second, the seeming absence of universal values which would seem to undermine the very possibility of understanding what good journalism might be.

Cyberspace challenges

Does the changing communication environment, the development of the Internet and other digitally-based technology, provide radically new ethical challenges for journalists? My answer is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is wrong to assume that we are driven by a kind of technological determinism, which tacitly

assumes that technology is a free-standing force driving us on to an ineluctable destiny. The view that technology determines behaviour and social change, neglects the extent to which technology emerges out of human priorities, interests and ethical imperatives (Winston, 1998). New technology generates new complexity but it is hard to see that the ethical questions posed are qualitatively different to those already faced by journalists.

Like all new technology, digital technology makes life both easier and more complicated for the reporter.³ The *Media in Cyberspace* study of American print journalists by Middleberg and Ross shows how Internet use has become part of 'the fabric and core of what journalism and communications are all about' (Merina, 2000). In 2000 the report found that three-quarters of those who responded to the survey went online at least once a day. In 1999 it was just 48 per cent and in 1994, when the study began, it was 16 per cent. More than half the newspaper and magazine journalists involved in the survey also said they communicated with readers via e-mail. And almost two-thirds of print journalists surveyed used the Internet to read publications online. The study showed that journalists are using the Internet 'for everything from story ideas and pitches to article research and reference needs.'

However, the study also identified areas of ethical concern, particularly related to:

- Copyright and the related issue of plagiarism.
- Sources and the problem of credibility.

Many websites lack credibility but in a worrying finding, 17 per cent of the respondents said they would report information found on the Internet, even if they could not confirm it elsewhere. The report's authors stated that: 'Many of our respondents also admit to publishing Internet rumors, often with little or no substantiation, and to using online sources whose credibility has not been adequately established.' It was also found that many journalists were reluctant to give credit to other publications' work when using their material from the Net.

A third area of increased ethical complexity is that of freedom and the kind of content to be found on the Internet. According to many commentators, 'the elusive and free-flowing ways of the Internet present far more of a challenge to authoritarian regimes than they do to open, democratic societies' (Hachten, 1998: 172). This may be so, as the examples of the use of the Internet to challenge regimes in Serbia and China demonstrate.

However, there is a dark side to the Web. The establishment of the Internet Watch Foundation in 1996 by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) was in direct response to the growth of child pornography available online. The foundation introduced a hotline allowing it to alert ISPs and national and international police authorities to the presence of possibly illegal material on their servers. And of course pornography is not the only cause for concern. The orchestrators of global terrorism and crime can use the Net to move money around, exchange information and plan operations. The new technology of freedom, which has allowed an enormous growth in online or e-journalism jobs and a huge expansion of possibilities for reporters, runs the risk of subverting the very world

that brought it into existence. These are real ethical worries which journalists – the guardians of freedom of expression – will also encounter.

Personal ethics and universal values

In the Preface to his boldly titled book *The Universal Journalist*, the former assistant editor of the *Observer* sets out his credo:

If you write and read enough stories, in the end you realize that there are only two types of journalism: good and bad. The bad is practised by those who rush faster to judgement than they do to find out, indulge themselves rather than the reader, write between the lines rather than on them, write in the dead terms of the formula, stereotype and cliché, regard accuracy as a bonus and exaggeration as a tool and prefer vagueness to precision, comment to information and cynicism to ideals. The good is intelligent, entertaining, reliably informative, properly set in context, honest in intent and effect, expressed in fresh language and serves no cause but the discernible truth. Whatever the audience. Whatever the culture. Whatever the language. Whatever the circumstances. Such journalism could be printed in any publication, because it is, in every sense of the word, universal. (Randall, 2000: viii)

We might not agree with each and every one of Randall's specifications of good or bad journalism but can we accept its underlying thesis? Can we agree that there are universal values which allow us to speak of good and bad journalism in global terms? In other words can we even speak of 'ethics and journalism' or should it be 'British ethics and journalism', 'western ethics and journalism' or 'Chinese ethics and journalism'?

Those who propose ethical relativism, who contend that ethical judgements are culturally determined and always relative to time and place, would certainly dismiss the notion of any kind of universal standard as a myth. There are also those, of which I am one, who believe that our very survival depends on dis-covering at least some globally shared values.

In fact, much modern and postmodern thinking about ethics does not abandon the aspiration to universality. The German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, advocates discourse ethics, espousing a universalistic outlook that rests on the assumption that humans are able to negotiate universally binding norms and are rational, emancipated human beings. Although feminists offer a critique of universalistic models of ethical thinking which ignore the 'difference' of women, this view is advanced as applying to all women and is used to promote a universal ethics of care. British sociologist, Nick Stevenson's discussion of these ethical projects refers us to the work of Zygmunt Bauman who has written of the possibility of a 'morality without ethics' (1999: 30). He advocates a postmodern ethics in which it is recognized that it is the individual who must be moral by taking ownership of their actions because: 'Being a moral person means that I am my brother's keeper' (Bauman, 1993: 51). Stevenson (1999: 32) is concerned that this view places too much emphasis on the individual, 'the worst kind of moralism,' which does not connect to the community. Warnock, however, gives a simple, perhaps obvious answer:

As they [children] more and more clearly see the implications of being human, they will want, as Aristotle might have put it, to be good specimens of humanity. In ethical terms they will want to be good. Without this underlying private want, they cannot be relied on to try for the ethically best in the public sphere. The morality that lies behind all efforts to improve things in the world at large, to defend human rights, to pass generally acceptable laws, to seek peace and justice, is essentially that of private standard-setting and of private ideals to be pursued. (2001: 180)

This account perhaps pays insufficient attention to the fact that we are fashioned by the communities we live in. Our concepts, experiences, feelings and the language we speak, are shaped by our living in society. Indeed, good behaviour can only be learned in interaction with others. And this brings us full circle. For of course, the community is in part constituted by the media itself. The British chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has explained how this works:

At the heart of any culture is the process by which we bring successive generations into a narrative, the story of which we are a part. There is, of course, not one story but many, but storytelling is the place where identity is found, it is the vehicle of continuity. (Sacks, 2001)

Historically this was the role of the elders, the priests, the bards and the poets. Now it is the role of the media. And the role of story-telling is immensely important for the values of a community:

Stories tell us who we are, where we came from and what we might aspire to be. A culture is defined by its narratives. If they make strenuous demands on the mind and spirit, then a culture has the most precious legacy of all. That is why the great dramatists, poets and novelists have an influence deeper and more enduring than politicians or military leaders. If the great stories are lost, forgotten or ignored, then a culture has begun its decline. (Sacks, 2001)

The story-tellers matter as do the stories they tell. They can celebrate diversity and the stranger in our midst or denounce and despise difference. The attitude expressed in Constantine Cavafy's poem, 'Waiting for the Barbarians', is all too easy:

And now, what will become of us without the barbarians/Those people were a kind of solution.

The British Defence Secretary's comment on Radio 4's *World at One* news that: 'Unfortunately the Taleban don't seem susceptible to reasonable argument' expresses the frustration when shared values seem impossible to find (Hoon: 17 September, 2001). But this can open the door to cynicism and cynicism is just the flip-side of fanaticism. Being cynical destroys the possibility of conversation about the very existence of standards. And fanatics don't converse.

To return to my question: can we agree that there are universal standards regarding what is good and bad journalism? We cannot ignore that journalism is a culturally established practice which has developed in the particular historical

circumstances of each country: Chinese journalism is very different to American journalism; British broadsheets are very different to their scholarly German counterparts. Do any of these traditions represent good or better journalism; bad or worse journalism? Of course, we might want to argue that this is indeed the case. And this returns us to the issue of agreeing what journalism is for. However, even if we can't all agree on this, I think we are still able to find values that all good journalism should share, the chief of which is the commitment to truthfulness.

Accountability and responsibility, examined in the previous chapter, encourage good journalism. But how is it possible to encourage good journalists? Certain qualities can be taught, and reporters can be trained in the technical skills necessary for their job. But how do reporters become curious, enthusiastic, determined, wise? I offer some suggestions here.

Preparing for the job

Education for journalism can play a role. Traditionally, and rightly, journalism programmes have concentrated on training in core skills and knowledge and the cultivation of the right kind of attitudes. Any specific thinking about ethics has been largely confined to the study of industry codes. Increasingly, journalism courses also pay attention to ethics as a separate subject. This is a welcome development but it's probably not the way journalistic virtues will be encouraged. In some ways too it can encourage the impression that ethics is remote from practice, from 'real life.' Three strategies might help to avoid this and contribute to the cultivation of the journalistic virtues.

Stories and role models. Some reporters attain legendary status among their peers and in the history books, not always for the best reasons. Writing about the United States, Goodwin acknowledges that there are many good role models in newsrooms, but 'there are also plenty of bad models, and the folklore of this country teaches unethical as well as ethical practices' (1995: 353). This is true. However, it is also true that there is much to be celebrated in the history of journalism and yet this is a neglected area of journalism education.

History's stories can inspire and educate: William Howard Russell's chronicles of the Crimea; Martha Gelhorn's reporting of the Second World War; the excesses of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* in its reporting of the Spanish-American war; Michael Buerk's accounts of famine in Ethiopia. Journalism history can provide the stories and the role models – for good and bad – which transmit the values of good journalism.

Case Studies. One of the most effective ways of thinking through ethical dilemmas – our motives, desires, attitudes and responses to them – is to be

faced, as far as is possible, with the precise problems faced by working journalists. Material from the statutory and self-regulatory bodies can now provide the raw material for case studies which can help journalism educators do exactly that.

Integrating ethics. Randall's observation that 'ethics are not some optional extra but are integral to every aspect of the job' (2000, 134) is one that we should be able to apply to a journalism programme. Too often 'ethics' can appear bolted on as a set of unrealistic, unrealizable ideals, when in fact being a good reporter is about being a good reporter. Programmes which underline this in all areas of the curriculum, which emphasize that ethical practice is precisely that, good practice, will be more effective in getting across this message.

On the job

Journalists have very little time for reflection. If they do reflect, it's usually after a decision has been made. However, two potent sources of moral wisdom are at hand: colleagues and experience.

Peer example. Example is one of the most compelling ways in which we learn. In Oakeshott's words:

We acquire habits of conduct, not by constructing a way of living upon rules or precepts learned by heart and subsequently practised, but by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner: we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language. (1991: 468).

Reporters learn in the newsroom and if cynicism is the prevailing ethical mood, it's hard for people to be fired up by what they do. Fortunately, cynicism is often no more than a mask adopted by many reporters to disguise the real passion and enthusiasm they have for their work. Journalists who care about truth, who are determined and seek precision, are the best media ethics teachers around.

Experience. One of Aristotle's great insights is that 'moral knowledge, unlike mathematical knowledge, cannot be acquired merely by attending lectures, and is not characteristically to be found in people too young to have much experience of life' (Hursthouse, 1999: 58). Textbook knowledge is of little use in deciding hard cases and sometimes the best we can do is look back on our own experiences and look to the advice of those wiser and more experienced than we are. The experience of getting things right and getting things wrong is a source of moral wisdom which good journalists are happy to share with others.

This is the key question which I raised in Chapter three. Why is it worth trying to be a good journalist in the first place? Why be good at all? The question has

exercised philosophers from Plato to the present day. In Plato's dialogue *The Republic*, Thrasymachus argues that morality is simply the interest of the powerful. Nietzsche re-formulated this view, seeking to undermine the foundations of morality and advocating the pursuit of excellence understood as the individual will to power.

Virtue ethics offers a different response. It says that by being good, by acting well we act rationally. In seeking to be loyal, hard-working, straightforward, truthful and courageous, human beings flourish as human beings. And if this is the case, we have reasons to be a good person.⁴ As Philippa Foot puts it:

If the sceptic does not succeed in refuting us here, but still goes on saying that he has not been shown that there is reason for acting as a good person would act, it is no longer clear what he is asking for. To ask for a reason for acting rationally is to ask for a reason where reasons must *a priori* have come to an end. And if he goes on saying 'But why *should* I?', we may query the meaning of this 'should'. (italics in original; 2001: 65)

If we hold up a standard of excellence in journalism related to the notions of professional competence and professional goals, it becomes possible to state reasons why being truthful and courageous, treating others with respect, keeping promises, caring about injustice, taking advice, not rushing to judgement and yet being decisive *are* qualities which journalists should cultivate. You simply can't be a good journalist without them.

In all likelihood the bad person or journalist doesn't *want* to act well. We've probably all had the experience of not doing something we should (making a phone call) – and rejecting the justification for it – because we simply don't *want* to do it. A reporter whose overwhelming desire is to make money won't *want* to see the reasons why being truthful is integral to good journalism and in these circumstances such a person cannot be convinced of why he or she should be good.

Being happy

And there is yet another, more profound reason why it is worth trying to be good at what we do and through what we do. Put simply, it will make us happy. In the Aristotelian view, happiness is about the fulfillment of the person, *eudaimonia*. Scruton has said that 'much of our moral confusion comes from the fact that we no longer know what happiness is or how to obtain it' (1998). To be happy we have to approve of ourselves, find qualities in ourselves that we find in others and admire. Otherwise we feel truly wretched. So it's not enough to be nice to be happy. We must be good and to be good we need virtues.

It might be argued that being virtuous may at times require us to sacrifice happiness. The fire-fighters who rushed to save the lives of others in the World Trade Center knew that they were certainly risking their own lives and their happiness as fathers, sons and lovers. Those who survived said they were only doing their job. But it was a job which called upon them to be heroically

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virtuous. How can virtue which can end in death be compatible with happiness? The answer lies in thinking about what kind of happiness we would have if we turned our back on others. We might find a sort of happiness but one run through with regret. In this way, as Foot writes, it is possible to understand that someone who sacrifices their life for the sake of justice 'would not have said that he was sacrificing his happiness, but rather that a happy life had turned out not to be possible for him' (2001: 97). Such extreme circumstances are thankfully rare in the lives of most people.

1 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, First Part of the Second Part, Question XIX. There has been a temptation among some modern British philosophers to dismiss Aquinas as a mediaeval theologian with little to contribute to contemporary debates. This is changing. Philippa Foot described Aquinas' discussion of conscience and particularly an 'erring conscience' as 'a wonderful piece of moral philosophy' (2001: 73) and the area of sources of badness in action, which Aquinas deals with in great detail, as a subject 'seldom well treated in modern moral philosophy' (2001: 74).

2 This is not to say that all subsequent coverage continued to meet the high standards of the first day. In particular, journalists became perhaps a little intoxicated by the 'frame' of war in the days which followed.

3 There seems to be a kind of hidden law at work when any new technology is introduced: we satisfy certain needs and desires but at the same time generate new ones. Better transport and labour-saving devices save us time, but we do less exercise and need to invent new machines (treadmills and fixed bicycles, for example) to keep fit.

4 Of course, these are deep philosophical waters. For readers who wish to explore them further I refer them once again to the work of Hursthouse and Foot where they will find attempts to show the rationality of morality from a virtue ethics perspective. The work of Bernard Williams expresses a sceptical view about the possibility of such a project.

The Press Complaints Commission is charged with enforcing the following Code of Practice which was framed by the newspaper and periodical industry and ratified by the Press Complaints Commission, 1st December 1999.

All members of the press have a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards. This code sets the benchmark for those standards. It both protects the rights of the individual and upholds the public's right to know. The Code is the cornerstone of the system of self-regulation to which the industry has made a binding commitment. Editors and publishers must ensure that the Code is observed rigorously not only by their staff but also by anyone who contributes to their publications.

It is essential to the workings of an agreed code that it be honoured not only to the letter but in the full spirit. The Code should not be interpreted so narrowly as to compromise its commitment to respect the rights of the individual, nor so broadly that it prevents publication in the public interest.

It is the responsibility of editors to co-operate with the PCC as swiftly as possible in the resolution of complaints. Any publication which is criticised by the PCC under one of the following clauses must print the adjudication which follows in full and with due prominence.

1 Accuracy

- i) Newspapers and periodicals should take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material including pictures.
- ii) Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it should be corrected promptly and with due prominence.
- iii) An apology must be published whenever appropriate.
- iv) Newspapers, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact
- v) A newspaper or periodical must report fairly and accurately the outcome of an action for defamation to which it has been a party.

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