

Ethics for Media Professionals: Guiding Insights and Principles

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Greetings

I am very pleased to be with you today for this symposium where we are invited to reflect on the challenge of Ethics Education. My own focus will be on the place of ethics education, and more precisely ethical formation, in a school or faculty of communications. My approach will be informed by my experience as a teacher of ethics for almost twenty years but I will draw also on my work over the last four years at the Pontifical Council where we have been attempting to understand the radical transformations which are happening in the area of communications. We are witnessing an exponential rate of development in the capacities of the technologies available to support and facilitate human communication. This revolution in information and communication technologies, however, cannot be adequately understood merely in instrumental terms: it is not simply a question of communication and the exchange of information growing in terms of volume, speed, efficiency and accessibility but rather that we are also witnessing concomitant changes in the ways in which people use these technologies to communicate, share information,

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learn and interact – we are living through a change of paradigm in the very culture of communication. These changes render ever more necessary an ongoing attention to the ethics of communications.

The concern to establish the significance of ethics as a foundational academic discipline within the curricula of Schools of Communication is also to be understood as the product of an increased societal awareness of the importance of professional ethics. The importance of medical ethics and bio-ethics has long been recognized, but in recent years there has been a more intense and explicit focus on the importance of ethics for those who exercise their professions in the arena of law and politics, in the world of commerce and finance and in the areas of media, marketing and journalism. It is interesting to note that the most quoted remark from Pope Benedict's Message for the 42nd World Communications Day in 2008 is his observation that: *Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for "info-ethics", just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life.* His insight clearly has touched a nerve and is widely reported as a call for the foundation of a new discipline of "info-ethics". This call is favourably received by a wide range of commentators, including many from outside the Catholic, or even religious, sphere. In the interests of accuracy, it should be pointed out the concept is not, as said by some, a papal creation but rather the endorsement of a concept that had enjoyed some currency at UNESCO and in the academic world. The response of people to the Pope's use of the term demonstrates, however, a public appetite for greater attention to be given to the ethical dimensions of communications. The Message itself - *"The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others."* – provides a succinct presentation of some of the key ethical principles and values that should guide communications professionals. Together with the earlier, and often overlooked, document of our Council, *Ethics in Communications* (2000), the message would be a very important resource for those who are looking to identify some basic guidelines for the development of a course or programme on media ethics.

Public attention to ethics and journalism has intensified over the last few months. The revelations of extra-ordinarily intrusive, and clearly unacceptable, forms of information gathering, especially in the British press, have given rise to a great deal of questioning and soul-searching within the media and to a demand for greater accountability from the public and from political institutions. If this public appetite for a more ethical basis for journalism is to lead to a renewal of the profession, it will require an examination of the very nature of the profession

and of its importance for the healthy functioning of civil and political society. It is interesting to note that Lord Justice Leveson, who has been charged by the British Government with heading an Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the Press, has declared his intention to *focus primarily on what I am calling the relationship between the press and the public, and the related issue of press regulation ... there needs to be a discussion of what amounts to the public good, to what extent the public interest should be taken into account and by whom.*

Ethics and Journalism: An Intrinsic Connection

I am convinced that reflection on the very idea of a profession can be a useful starting point for our reflection on how Faculties/Schools of Journalism should address the issues of teaching ethics to aspirant communications professionals. A profession is usually constituted by people who share specialized knowledge and expertise that enable them to provide important services to the general community and meet significant human needs. Doctors are experts in the care of health; lawyers are specialists in assisting people to protect their rights and interests and in the public goods of justice and order, etc. In all cases, professionals by the very nature of their skills and expertise are obliged to stand for (to profess) certain values. These values are not imposed externally but are determined by the very nature of the professions they are privileged to exercise. This methodology would suggest that an effort to reflect on the ethics of journalism should begin with a reflection on the nature of the skills and expertise possessed by such professionals and the human goods they seek to serve.

It is common to talk of *professional autonomy* – this concept, properly understood, seeks to vindicate the ethical responsibility of a profession. It falls to a profession to articulate its core ethical values and commitments. Ethics should not be imposed arbitrarily on professions from without – ethics should be born from the reflections and experiences of “thoughtful practitioners”. Those who are specialists in the area of ethics – theologians, philosophers and lawyers – can help professionals to understand and appreciate the underlying theories and traditions of formal ethical reflection; they can help professionals to articulate, formulate and codify their ethical responsibilities. Ethics should not, however, be left to the so-called experts; serious professional ethics requires the co-operation of those who have formal training in ethics and those who understand and are experienced in the exercise of the skills and expertise that define their profession. In a University context, it is important that the “ethics course” is not handed over to the philosophy or theology department nor that it should be

taught without their assistance but that it is the product of a serious and sustained inter-disciplinary collaboration.

Professional Ethics: Guiding Insights

In the area of professional ethics, the attempt to articulate ethical responsibilities usually proceeds from an analysis of the *fundamental human needs* that the profession strives to serve. Even the most superficial reflection will reveal that a *concern for truth will be a core ethical value*. This intuition was articulated by Pope Benedict when he addressed the participants at a Congress for representatives of Catholic Schools of Communication organized by our Council in May 2008: *It is self-evident that at the heart of any serious reflection on the nature and purpose of human communications there must be an engagement with questions of truth. A communicator can attempt to inform, to educate, to entertain, to convince, to comfort; but the final worth of any communication lies in its truthfulness ... The art of communication is by its nature linked to an ethical value, to the virtues that are the foundation of morality*. For those involved in the teaching of communications, he specified that: *In the light of that definition, I encourage you, as educators, to nourish and reward that passion for truth and goodness that is always strong in the young. Help them give themselves fully to the search for truth. Teach them as well, however, that their passion for truth, which can be well served by a certain methodological scepticism, particularly in matters affecting the public interest, must not be distorted to become a relativistic cynicism in which all claims to truth and beauty are routinely rejected or ignored*.

This fundamental commitment to truth in the dissemination and sharing of information and knowledge is necessary to enable individuals to make responsible choices and for societies to flourish. *Ethics in Communications* elaborates on this insight: *the media are called to serve human dignity by helping people live well and function as persons in community. Media do this by encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue*. The document goes on to spell out the contribution of media to the promotion of human well-being in different contexts. Media are indispensable for democratic societies: they provide information about events and important policy issues, about politicians and other public figures. They enable leaders to communicate quickly and directly about matters of significant public concern. Ultimately, they provide the public with the information they will use to make intelligent judgements and to determine their choices in elections. Alan Rusbridger (Editor, *The Guardian*) makes the point that: *As journalists we would like it to be self-evident that what we do is*

as crucial to democracy as a clean water supply or a fire service. Given the importance of media for the functioning of democracy, it is obvious that certain responsibilities follow. In one of the most interesting reflections on the issue of media ethics and responsibility, the British philosopher Onora O'Neill highlighted the importance of **trust** in enabling social life to flourish. She spoke of the important role of the media in holding various interest groups to account and in scrutinizing their trustworthiness but she stressed the concomitant responsibility on it to exercise this role responsibly: *If the media mislead, or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned. The new information technologies may be anti-authoritarian, but curiously they are often used in ways that are also anti-democratic. They undermine our capacities to judge others' claims and to place our trust.* The role of media in providing the public with the information which they need in order to make responsible choices is no less crucial in the arenas of economics and business, education and culture, and religion.

If social communications professionals are to ensure that their skills and knowledge are genuinely at the service of the general human good, and that they are enabling informed decision making in different contexts, they must be vigilant to maintain an ethical commitment to meeting *the best interests of others* over their own particular needs. One moral theologian has defined this commitment as requiring professionals not to view their skills and knowledge "as possessions for private financial gain or social status" but as talents to be put at service of others even if that is at a high personal cost and requires sacrifice. In his presentation to the Leveson Inquiry, Rusbridger expressed this same understanding: *A free press is not there for the benefit of a group called journalists. It's primarily there for the benefit of ordinary citizens. The freedoms belong to them – freely to receive reliable and timely information about their society.*

The true measure of progress is not to be found in the technical or logistical efficiency of the new means of communications alone but in the purposes which they serve. Those in the media who use the new technologies are faced with a choice. They can seek to ensure that the new technologies, and the enhanced potential for communication that they offer are placed at the service of individuals and communities in their search for the truth or they can allow them to be used to promote their own interests and/or the interests of those they represent in ways that manipulate individuals and communities. This challenge has long been recognised, as Pope Benedict has pointed out: *In one of the earliest reflections on the nature of communication, Plato highlighted the dangers of any type of communication that seeks to promote the aims and purposes of the communicator or those by whom he or she is employed without consideration for the truth of what is communicated.* Speaking at the

Leveson Inquiry, Richard Peppiatt, a former tabloid journalist, drew attention to the dangers that follow when this distinction is not observed: *But the people caught in the crossfire of this cynical approach are the millions of readers who buy tabloid newspapers every day in good faith, unaware of the commercial and ideological agendas which are shaping what they read. Instead of being told the truth they deserve, they are being told whatever it suits newspapers to let them know.*

It is only when new media technologies are used to *serve the true well-being of individual persons and of human communities* that we can say that they are truly instruments of progress. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict stressed the need for a proper use of the new technologies: *Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalized development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity.*

Faculties of Communication should encourage those who will work in the media to attend to the great responsibilities that rest with them and to uphold the highest standards of their professions. In particular, they should be strengthened in their commitment to make known the truth and to defend it “against those who tend to deny or destroy it.” Media professionals ought to be invited to defend the ethical underpinnings of their profession and to ensure that the “centrality and the inviolable dignity of the human person” are always vindicated. They must be reminded that these *ethical commitments can be eroded* by factors such as competition for audiences, commercial pressures and ideological prejudices. It is interesting to note that nobody has sought to defend at the level of ethical principle the practises exposed in recent journalistic scandals (misinformation, gross invasions of privacy, plagiarism and the manipulation of sources) – the ethical crisis has been at the existential rather than the epistemological level. We must, however, ask what it was about the culture of various media organizations that allowed those practises to develop and that failed to detect or to prohibit them. Professionals must be encouraged to attend to the institutional cultures of their working environments and should be alerted to the danger of the media becoming the voice of “economic materialism and ethical relativism”. Here again it is instructive to listen to Peppiatt: *I am not attempting to absolve myself, or others, of personal responsibility for our actions, only to contextualise them. Journalists aren’t, for the most part, bad people. But, like all humans, they adjust to their environment, and, like in all competitive industries, those who adjust best, go furthest. Do it long enough, you’ll even start to forget that the framework in which you operate is intrinsically corrupted and dishonest.*

A distinguishing feature of professional ethics, which could help to orientate the approach to ethics in a faculty of communications, is the establishment of self-regulating *structures of accountability*. The American specialist in ethics, William F. May, has said that: *In professional ethics today, the test of moral seriousness may depend not simply upon personal compliance with moral principles but upon the courage to hold others accountable*. Faculties could profitably try to instil in their students the sense of what it means to belong to a profession; to a community which seeks to strengthen the ethical commitments of its members and is never afraid to disown unethical and destructive practises. This can present particular challenges in a culture where no one wishes to be considered to be a “moralizer” or to be “judgemental”.

In the context of the *new digital media*, it is worth noting that this ethical responsibility of individual journalists and of the media as a whole is both magnified and threatened. A particular result of the changes in the structures of journalism is that increasingly smaller numbers of professional journalists are expected to handle ever greater volumes of information. There is an ever present danger that the journalists will not be in a position to deal critically and in depth with this so-called “*information overload*”. There is real danger that our cultural discourse becomes superficial. One commentator has expressed this risk succinctly: *Visual and electronic media, today’s dominant media, need a certain kind of content. They thrive on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But thinking requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence and the methodical skills of logic*. The gradual loss of the boundary between the provision of information and entertainment witnesses, and further contributes, to a loss of a social appetite for serious engagement with important issues. Media attention can also be very fickle and one seemingly compelling issue is abandoned as another is judged more likely to engage audiences – what is genuinely of public interest is not always of interest to the public. Is it merely a coincidence that the concentrated media focus on the protests in Iran after the Presidential elections in June 2009 and the resultant public awareness and concern seem to have ended when Michael Jackson died? Responsible media must seek to prioritise information and avoid either creating or feeding a public appetite for sensationalism or simplification.

This risk of lowering of journalistic standards is further compounded in the digital arena where the traditional distinction between the consumers and the producers of news, information and opinion is less clearly drawn. The use of blogs, twitter and other social media means that stories are often edited, commented upon and re-packaged before they reach their final audience. It is important that professional journalists give witness to the importance of core values such as objectivity, fairness and respect. In particular, it has never been more necessary to uphold the distinction between fact and opinion. It is important that the *wider public* is formed in media

literacy so that it can engage in a more informed and critical manner with different media and that it can hold them to account. A more informed and engaged public will lead to a more responsible media.

Foundational Ethics: Useful Distinctions

Within academic schools of philosophy it is common to *distinguish between fundamental or foundational ethics and special or applied ethics*. While the attention of the latter focuses on specific issues and disciplines, the former tends to be concerned with more basic questions about what it means to talk of good and evil or right and wrong and how it is possible to make ethical judgments. Even though the ethics of communications clearly belongs to the realm of special ethics (and much teaching of ethics in communications focuses on case studies and limit situations); it would be a great mistake not to attend to some of the material that would normally be associated with fundamental ethics. In particular, it is important that students of communications would be encouraged to study the different *ethical theories* and to engage critically with the, often implicit, influence of these theories on contemporary debates about ethics and on their own ethical reasoning. Without even being aware of it, many students in their approach to ethics are guided by insights that are rooted in utilitarianism (the end justifies the means), positivism (what is legal is ethical), emotivism (our feelings can tell us what is right and wrong) or relativism (there are no absolutes in the area of ethics). There is a real value in asking the students to study these theories so that they can begin to examine explicitly and critically their own, often unacknowledged, criteria for judging right and wrong. One is reminded here of the observation of Maynard Keynes concerning academic economic theories: *The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.*

Students should be introduced to the study of the *objective ethical theories*, such as the natural moral law tradition, which are rooted in the conviction that the rightness or wrongness of human ethical choices can be discerned by a process of reflection on what it means to be human. Choices which, by their very nature, promote the human flourishing of individuals and society are judged to be good; while those that are intrinsically damaging to the well-being of persons and of human community

are judged to be bad. Lies, for example, are judged to be inherently unethical, because by their nature they undermine the trust that is necessary for good personal and community relationships, even though one might imagine a specific situation where a lie might seem to bring particular advantages. These objective theories, which are correctly seen as involving a commitment to a method of moral reasoning rather than as providing a shortcut to truth, require that humans work together to decide which choices and practises are to be encouraged and which should be discouraged. This discernment requires a careful consideration of all the relevant perspectives that are brought to ethical debates by different protagonists so that our human efforts to work out what is ethical are as objective as possible. These theories promote a dialogical approach to ethics, that is accessible to all human beings notwithstanding their religious or ideological differences, and provide a theoretical underpinning for the possibility of a genuine public debate of ethical issues. It is a shared commitment to searching for truth, rooted in the conviction of the ultimate objectivity of truth, which gives such debates their ultimate value – otherwise they become exercises in coercion and manipulation in which each seeks to assert his or her own view without any reference to the claims of truth. In this context, it is always worth highlighting the distinction between objective judgements which would seek to determine what is right and wrong in itself and subjective judgements where one is concerned to determine the personal culpability or otherwise of the persons whose actions may be judged to be wrong.

Within the area of fundamental ethics, much attention has been given to the importance of the distinction between normative ethics and “*character ethics*”. The work of Alistair MacIntyre (among others) has highlighted the reality that ethics is not just about what we do or the rules or norms we should follow but is also concerned with the type of people we are and the virtues that must be engendered and fostered in ethical agents. If schools or faculties of communications are to be effective promoters of the ethical formation of their students, they will not be satisfied merely to teach professional codes of ethics or to articulate ethical norms and rules. Brian Cathcart (Professor of Journalism, Kingston University London), reflecting on the need for reform in the area of media ethics, recently insisted that: *No doubt regulation of some sort has a part to play, but I am convinced that nothing will make a greater difference now than a change in the mindset and habits of journalists themselves, a change which acknowledges the primacy of the public interest.*

Universities cannot exempt themselves from the task of forming the character of their students. Ethics is never simply about what humans do, but about the kind of people they are. It has long been observed that *agere sequitur esse*: it is never enough that someone knows what he or she should do; we should consider

how we can shape the character of our students so that they will be possessed of a willingness to live by the highest values. One is reminded here of the significance attributed by classical moral theology, and subsequently by Lonergan, to the concept of antecedent willingness. If a person is not willing in advance to do that which is right, and to avoid doing what is wrong, it is unlikely that his or her effort to learn what is right and wrong will be either thorough or meaningful.

It is important that we enable our students to appreciate the best ethical traditions of their future profession by identifying for them *appropriate role models*. In this context, it is appropriate to remember that many journalists have given an extraordinary witness to their commitment to the truth. Journalists throughout the world, and I am aware also in the Philippines, have suffered persecution, imprisonment and even death because of this commitment and because of their unwillingness to be silent in the face of injustice and corruption. Their witness is an eloquent testimony to the highest standards to which the media can aspire and their example serves to encourage all media professionals to strengthen their commitment to the truth and, thereby, to serve the common good of all humanity. The greatest test of an individual's ethical standards or values will often occur in those situation where adherence to his or her own standards is likely to be at a cost to his or her personal interests. We must foster in our students an admiration for those communicators and journalists who, often at a great cost to themselves, have had the courage to resist the threats or bribes of those who would seek to corrupt or silence them.

The Ethical Mission of a Catholic University

In the particular context of this conference, I believe it is appropriate to ask what, if any, is the distinctive contribution of a school or faculty of communications in a Catholic university to the teaching of ethics. In the background to this questions there lurks another: what difference, if any, does a professional journalist's faith make to his or her exercise of the profession? To avoid any misunderstanding, I would wish to preface my attempt to answer these questions by stating that the distinctiveness can never be at the cost of true professionalism. The pursuit of excellence – a pursuit that is always contextually determined and that is dependent on the resources available – can never be compromised by the Catholic identity of a school or faculty. This involves a commitment to the highest possible standards of professional formation and personal attention being made available to all students irrespective of class, belief or race. Equally, it must be obvious that the ethical Catholic journalist must be first and foremost an ethical journalist – he or she should be a good journalist, both in the professional and moral sense. If ethics is intrinsic to professionalism, it is to be

expected that the distinctiveness of the believer's ethics will be found at the level of motivation and intentionality rather than in terms of normative specificity.

In the light of the values that are core for communications and journalism, it would be appropriate for Catholic faculties, either by way of an explicit mission statement or, perhaps more importantly, through their lived pedagogical philosophy, to demonstrate a *specific commitment to the pursuit of truth and objectivity*. This commitment is especially significant in the contemporary context where many academic institutions seem to have abandoned the notion of truth and are beset by concepts of relativism that seek to deny the existence of objective standards. Pope Benedict has addressed this need during his visit to the Catholic University of America in 2008: *These harmful developments point to the particular urgency of what we might call "intellectual charity". This aspect of charity calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love. Indeed, the dignity of education lies in fostering the true perfection and happiness of those to be educated. In practice "intellectual charity" upholds the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth. It guides the young towards the deep satisfaction of exercising freedom in relation to truth, and it strives to articulate the relationship between faith and all aspects of family and civic life. Once their passion for the fullness and unity of truth has been awakened, young people will surely relish the discovery that the question of what they can know opens up the vast adventure of what they ought to do. Here they will experience "in what" and "in whom" it is possible to hope, and be inspired to contribute to society in a way that engenders hope in others.*

As we have seen, any serious engagement with questions about communication and the purposes it can serve will lead to an engagement with *limit questions about the point and purpose of life*. Why be truthful? Why give attention to the plight of those who suffer poverty or are exploited? Why seek to expose the lies or the injustices of those who are rich or powerful? In our curriculums we should open up these questions. This might be done by drawing on those who teach philosophy or theology in our Universities to allow for an interdisciplinary exploration of these ultimate questions. Such questions can also be raised through the consideration of literature and cinema. Such approaches can serve to encourage our students to reflect on the basic questions that are often squeezed out by the busyness of life, especially in our technological age where little space is left for that type of reflection that traditionally was said to be hallmark of a worthwhile life.

In approaching the fundamental questions, and in attempting to respond to the most profound anthropological searching of our students, Catholic schools and faculties should not shy away from a *respectful presentation of the most fundamental*

belief of our Church in the unlimited and gracious nature of God's love for all people revealed in Jesus Christ. I have already spoken of the willingness of many journalists, believers and unbelievers alike, to put the truth ahead of their own interests – the cost will not always be as obvious as in cases where journalists find that their lives or liberty is threatened but even lesser costs such as the loss of promotion and favour can be equally corrosive of ethical commitment. In seeking to offer a motivation and rationale for such sacrifice, we can as believers point to the great example of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who refused to be intimidated by violence and death, and whose faithfulness was vindicated by the Father. The Christian gospel offers us a reason to resist those who seek to deflect us from our highest commitments, moreover as believers we know that we are never alone when we are faithful in serving the good of others. Catholic, or Christian, communicators have no monopoly of good ethical behaviour, but their faith offers them a narrative that should serve to make sense of and motivate such behaviour.

In trying to seek the balance between finding a way of speaking of Jesus, whose spirit gives life and meaning to our social teaching, and respecting the freedom of those of other religious traditions or none, we can turn with profit to the words of Pope Benedict XVI : *Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. (Deus Caritas Est, 31).* ■



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