



Common Ethical Transgressions in Media

**Bad media practices that
need to be weeded out**



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Guidelines on Common Bad Media Practices

Bad media practices that need to be weeded out

Introduction

In order to establish a strong democratic and just society, having a strong print and electronic media is very critical. For the media to keep everyone in society – (more so those in power) constantly in check, ensuring democracy grows from strength to strength and that justice reigns supreme, the media requires self-regulation, both within itself and outwards.

Outside the media, this has long been sorted out with the establishment of the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT). What this means is that the local media does not require another body outside what local journalists already have in place, namely – their own, independent professional body that takes care of what they churn out to the public, day in and day out.

Which is to say, for a long time, the task has been the fortification of the media from within; which entailed putting down in writing, ethical guidelines which are easy to carry around newsrooms; guidelines that those within and without, including non-journalists, can always refer to in the course of writing their copies or in the event of

a dispute over the manner in which a published or aired story has been handled.

The ethical guidelines, most of which are not new to journalists, are, however, not cast in stone. They are open to improvement from time to time. The importance of these guidelines lie in the fact that the media cannot assume the role of the society's watchdog if it does not have in place its own watchdog that will ensure journalists adhere to their professional ethics before they point an accusing finger at others.

Probably the pertinent question here is: why now? The answer is: they are required more now than ever before because, one, the number of both media outlets and journalists has increased quite considerably over the recent past. Two, bad ethical practices in the local print and electronic media are committed with such repeated monotony, that if something is not urgently done, such practices will much sooner than later get out of control.

What is more worrying is that transgressions are committed by a journalistic cadre which is not only well educated; but one that is also better professionally trained than their predecessors of the 1970s, most of whom were mere school leavers, with the media sector boasting hardly five degree holders.

To understand the seriousness of these transgressions, it

is pertinent to review, albeit in brief, what the core ethical values of journalism are, starting with the question: what is journalism?

The Director of Ethical Journalism Network, Mr Aidan White, says: “Journalism is the gathering, reporting and dissemination of news and information in the public interest.”

He says there are about 400 codes of conduct around the world, covering all aspects of journalism, some of them short and others long. But all of them are focused on five key values of journalism, which are as follows:

Cardinal Principles of Journalism

Accuracy: This refers to correctness, complete absence of mistakes. Under this principle, there is no deceptive handling of facts. Journalists work on the basis of facts or fact-based information.

Independence: It means you are free from control. Not getting help or money from outside. The work that you do is your own work; it is not something you do on behalf of anyone else. You are not there to be a spokesman of the government. You are not for the interest of any particular business or interest group.

You are transparent in whatever you do. Therefore, when

you are dealing with your audience, producing materials for print or electronic media, you are acting independently as a professional.

Impartiality: It means not taking sides in whatever story you are handling. It refers to the need to recognize that there is more than one side of the story, and indeed, very often, there are more than two sides of the story. As a journalist, you are responsible for looking at and thinking of what the other sides of the story are. This is a fundamental element in balancing the story.

Humanity: As a journalist, you are supposed to show humanity. You must be aware of the consequences of what you plan to publish (in the print media) or on what you plan to broadcast (in electronic media, radio and television). You have to be aware that, sometimes the words you publish or the pictures you show can do damage or be harmful to some people. It is not the job of the journalist to do undue harm. It is our job to protect the people.

It is very important that when we are doing our job, we do not engage in hate speech, we do not show obscene images or unnecessary explicit images of violence because we are part and parcel of the humanitarian process and that is what humanity should be.

Accountability: This is probably one of the most difficult things for journalists. We find it difficult to say sorry and

admit our mistakes, even though we may be lacerating criticisms of others. What we have to do is, engage with the audience and correct our mistakes and provide remedies when we get it wrong,” Aidan White concludes. Therefore, going through media ethics below that journalists are required to adhere to, one is constantly reminded of what White has said above.

Ethical Issues

- **Multiple Sources:** For any media outlet to be relevant to the public it purports to serve; its news stories and feature articles must bear multiple sources. Multiple sources tend to strengthen the veracity of a story.

For example, studies conducted by the MCT repeatedly show local media to be suffering from what has come to be known as single source syndrome (SSS). The worst part of SSS is that it is dominated by male voices. One particular MCT study shows that ‘Mwananchi’ newspaper had 99 SSS stories, two-sources stories (63), and multiple sources (158), male voices 1,913 stories (95%) female voices 93 stories (5%).

The same study shows ‘Nipashe’ had 184 SSS, two-sources stories were 113, multiple sources (103), male voices 1,307 (94%) and female voices were 88 (6%). ‘Uhuru’ had 211 SSS, two single sources-stories were 155 while multiple-sources stories 204. The paper’s male voices were 3,111

(95%) while female voices were 237 (8%). These statistics reflect the magnitude of the problem that must be dealt with urgently by the local media.

In addition to bearing multiple sources, an evaluation of the information sources should be done in order to verify that the sources are reliable, to what extent and checking who is behind the information – and for what purpose. This method of source criticism is important for good media practice. Failure to do so, enhanced bad practised in the field.

- **Bad Taste Pictures:** This is a problem that local media, both print and electronic, need to keep away from. Bad taste pictures do not enhance, in any way, the cardinal role of the media, namely educating, informing and entertaining. On the contrary, they are a bad taste to readers of newspapers and TV viewers, just as bad language is to radio listeners.
- **The Right of Reply:** It is extremely important for any media that wants to be taken seriously by its readers, viewers or listeners to ensure it adheres to the right of reply. It is better to hold a story until the accused is afforded his or her right of reply. Carrying a story simply because a person could not be reached through his or her mobile phone is not a defence against a person's right of reply.

It is actually more serious if the person is accused of wrongdoing or mentioned adversely in one way or the

other. An example to the above is provided by the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation (TBC) television channel. In its 10am news bulletin carried by the TV channel, the 2018 Uhuru Torch leader, Mr Charles Kabeho, was shown, in a clip, refusing to lay the foundation stone in one newly completed construction site in Mwangi District, Kilimanjaro Region. He argued that he could not carry out the exercise for a project that had all the hallmarks of corruption. The civil engineer involved in the project tried to explain, but he was shouted down. But the TBC channel failed to show, clearly, the clip or picture of the completed project, hence robbing viewers of the opportunity of making their own judgment on Mr Kabeho's claims. MCT's past studies depict a rarity of stories where accused people were given the right of reply.

- **Coverage of Children Stories:** Early in 2018, women who claimed to have been abandoned by men who had sired their children flocked at the Dar es Salaam Regional Commissioner's office. This was after the RC claimed that he could force the "runaway" fathers to take care of "their" children. For a couple of days, the local media – print and electronic – carried photos and clips of the women, along with their children who had accompanied them to the RC's office. The media action was a violation of the children's ethical and legal rights.

The 'Code of Ethics for Media Professionals' enjoins the media to protect vulnerable members of the society and be extra sensitive when dealing with children. During

their meetings, the women also gave to the RC names of the alleged fathers of their children that included, among others, government officials and party leaders from across the political divide. Many of the men whose names were made public, both by the women and the media, were not given the right of reply. This was unfair.

- **Protection of Children:** The media need to know two things about children. One, much as some of them may not be able to articulate their needs, given their tender age, they are, all the same, entitled to protection of their basic human rights, just like adults. Two, and more importantly, is the fact that children are vulnerable; and because of this, their human rights may be easily violated, hence the need for the media to be in the forefront in the protection of the young ones' rights. Protecting children's rights entails not exposing their identity when their human rights become subject of violations.

A good example to that is provided by a story published on page 3 by 'Mwananchi' newspaper of July 22, 2018 with the headline that read: 'Ukatili: Mtoto aingizwa kalamu sehemu za siri.' Literally translated as 'A pen is driven through a child's private parts'. Although the leading Kiswahili daily rightly withheld the name of the child, the story identified the names of her grandmother, father and a neighbour.

Moreover, the newspaper went on to identify the age

of the child and where she lived, hence making the first, commendable act of withholding the child's name meaningless as it easily made people living around identify the victim of sexual assault. In the case of protecting a victim's identity, particularly when it is children, means giving no room for anyone to identify the victim, even if it is a neighbour. Such media action would give the child total protection against prejudices when he or she finally grows into adulthood.

- **Writing Apology:** This is an action that needs to be promptly taken by any media once it commits a mistake. The mistake may have been committed against an individual, group of people, a public or private institution. However, general practice shows that many media outlets and print media in particular, are reluctant to apologize. They tend to think, erroneously, that by apologizing, they will erode their standing in the eyes of the public. However, on the contrary, an apology shows honesty, and earns the media house immense respect from the public. In more serious cases, a prompt apology may even protect a media outlet from legal action.

An example of a good apology is provided by 'Nipashe' of June 21, 2018. The paper published an apology on its front page over a page 2 story the newspaper had published on June 20, 2018. The correction and apology was spontaneous and came out on the next edition on June 21, 2018. The Kiswahili daily had carried a story with headline "*Upigaji*

mabilioni Serikalini waibuka.” Both the story and headline had carried a notion that within the government, there was misuse or theft of billions of shillings. In the apology, the editor regretted the meaning of the headline and what the story had conveyed to the general public and said sorry to all those who were inconvenienced by the story.

A bad example of an apology is provided by one of the mainstream Kiswahili newspapers which on November 16, 2010, in its page 5, carried what was supposed to be an apology with the following headline: *‘Taarifa ya Agnes Kabigi kwa vyombo vya habari Agosti 8, 2010 kuhusu msitu wa Enguserosambu’* which literally means: *‘Press statement dated August 8, 2012 from Agnes Kabigi regarding Enguserosambu Forest’*.

One thing which serves as a pointer that this was supposed to have been an apology, is the date of the press release, August 2010 published almost two months later, on November 16, 2010.

Instead of stating, clearly, that the press release was an apology over an inaccurate story it had published in relation to the press release, the editor chose to hide his paper’s mistake by reproducing the entire press release without notifying his readers why he was reproducing, in his newspaper, a press release issued over two months back.

Yet, while going through the piece, the thrust of the content showed that the newspaper was indirectly apologizing for an inaccurate story it had published earlier.

- **The Presumption of Innocence:** As a matter of constitutionality, a person is presumed innocent unless the contrary is proved. This is a constitutional prerequisite that should be respected by the media. Yet experience shows that more often than not, the local media “try and convict suspects” before they are brought before the court. One example of a sloppy court reporting is provided by a story carried by ‘Uhuru’ on page 24 of its August 9, 2018 edition, with a headline that read, “*Apandishwa Mahakamani kwa ubakaji*” which can be literally translated as ‘Brought before the court for raping’.

The headline gives the impression that the suspect had already been convicted of rape. Yet at the time the story was published, the court was still in the process of hearing the case and it had therefore not yet determined the innocence or otherwise of the accused. It would have therefore been proper to coin a headline that would rightly reflect the state the case was at that stage, which was that the man was still innocent, and would remain so, until proven otherwise by the august court. On July 28, 2018, ‘Nipashe’ published a judgemental headline for its news story on page 9, which read: “*Polisi yanasa watu 40 kwa uhalifu.*” This can be translated as, ‘Police arrest 40 for engaging in crime’. It is important to bear in mind that the

40 men are mere suspects. They were, at that particular time, not criminals, and the onus of proving whether or not they were involved in any criminal activity rested with the accuser who should convince the court to find the accused guilty and pass its judgement. That explains why, once arrested by police, the suspect must be sent to court not more than 24 hours after.

Editors, however, have the tendency to carry judgemental headlines in order to entice readers to buy their newspapers. The problem of such gimmick is that if a smart person is discharged by the court after being found innocent, he or she might decide to file a case against the newspaper which had carried his or her picture as a member of a group of people the police claimed was of a gang of criminals. The newspaper in question is likely to face serious legal consequences.

In short, using photos of people whom the police claim are criminals, or issuance of statements to that effect, will not protect the editor in the event of such 'criminals' suing him for damages in case they are discharged by the court.

- **Police Statements on Crime or Death Not Final:** It has become almost a general practice for the local media to take police statements as absolute truth and final. That is wrong. Police arrests of people alleged to have been involved in crime should be treated by the media as nothing more than a seizure of suspects. The same thing can be said about police pronouncements

about the number of people alleged to have been killed, say, in a road accident. In case of such an accident, or any accident for that matter, it is the duty of the reporter on duty to ask the police giving out the statement over whether a medical doctor had certified the death of a person or persons. It has also become a practice for the police to parade, before the media a group of persons they have arrested. Such persons are sometimes paraded together with weapons they are alleged to have been in possession of at the time of their arrest.

The police usually claim to have seized such persons either as they were about to commit a crime or while they were in the course of committing a crime. Newspapers and television stations have always gone ahead to publish or parade such persons. The local media is lucky that some of such persons who are finally released, for lack of evidence, have never gone back to court to seek redress for being “convicted” by the media of crimes they never committed. However, in due course, more and more Tanzanians will wake and get to know their rights in this regard and some media houses could end up paying through the nose.

- **The Use of Discriminatory or Offensive Words:** As already noted in the introduction of this ‘Media Ethics Guideline’, the role of the media in society is to inform, educate and entertain. The media cannot, however, succeed in informing and educating the

people in the society in which it operates, if it uses discriminatory and offensive words. Journalists are required to be sensitive to the rights and dignity of all the people regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, geography or social status.

Examples of three stories which displayed lack of sensitivity were all provided by the 'Nipashe'. On June 30, 2018, page 3 of 'Nipashe' carried a story which was headlined: '*Kikongwe akatisha uhai kwa kujikata mshipa kwa kisu*'. The headline can be literally translated as, 'Wizened old man kills himself after cutting his main artery'. The Kiswahili word, "kikongwe", is derogatory, for it refers to a very old person, usually shrivelled or wrinkled with age. Instead of using the derogatory word that despises the elderly, a polite word like "mzee", which simply means "old person", would have sufficed. There was no need of getting into details on how the man killed himself.

On August 7, 2018, the same newspaper, again on page 3, published a story entitled: "*Lugola aonya kampuni za ulinzi kuajiri vikongwe.*" Lugola referred to here is the current Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Kangi Lugola. The headline can be translated as "Lugola warns security firms to hire old people. The word "vikongwe" is a plural for "kikongwe", a word whose meaning we have critically explained above. We are not told why by the minister does not want elderly persons employed by security firms, as we only have

the headline suggesting so. But it is not difficult to guess why, for it is a fact that old people are not the best choice for the work of guardsmen as they would normally lack the physical ability, agility and alertness required for protectors of people and their properties.

On July 16, 2018 on page 10, 'Nipashe' published a story with the headline, '*Serikali yakumbuka wanafunzi viziwi*'. The headline can literally be thus translated: "The government finally remembers deaf pupils". The word "kiziwi" (singular for viziwi), which refers to a person with hearing impairment, was commonly used in the past, but in today's culture it is considered crude or impolite. In the place of "viziwi" the headline writer could have said something like 'wenye ulemavu wa kusikia'.

Another derogatory word in the same headline is "yakumbuka" which translates as "remembers". The manner with which "yakumbuka" has been used in the headline is also derogatory as it implies the government had, until then, forgotten persons with hearing disability. The right headline would have been; '*Serikali kuboresha hali ya wanafunzi wenye ulemavu wa kusikia*' (Government to improve conditions of persons with hearing disability).

- **Sensationalism:** This is a craft employed by some editors, especially in the print media, in order to boost flagging sales of their newspapers. A good

example of a sensationalized story is provided by the 'MCT Monitoring Report' which covered local media between July, 2010 and June, 2011.

The MCT report provides the example of a story which was carried out by one Kiswahili newspaper on November 2, 2010. The newspaper in question had a story entitled, 'Akamatwa kwa kufanya mapenzi na mbwa Morogoro' which can be literally translated as 'Man arrested in Morogoro for making love with a dog'. The story cited as its source the Morogoro Regional Police Commander who was further quoted, in the story, as saying that the dog was later found to be pregnant with the arrested suspect alleged to be responsible for the pregnancy.

If the editor was professional in his work, he would not have allowed the publication of the story without first finding out, if it was possible, one, for a human being to mate with a dog; and two, if it was scientifically possible for a human to impregnate a dog. In order to get the right answers, the editor ought to have contacted both a veterinary and human physicians.

The fact that the editor did not take either of the foregoing actions to ascertain the veracity of the story clearly shows that his objective was to sensationalize the article in order to boost the sales of his newspaper. And then, even to a non-professional, describing the action of a man having sex with an animal (bestiality) as "*kufanya mapenzi*" (making

love) is a depiction of ridiculousness and immature mischief.

For quite some years now, editors have also been known to produce sensational headlines that do not reflect the content of the story. Such headlines are clearly used for the purpose of boosting newspaper sales. The tendency to use such headlines is noticed in both mainstream and yellow print media. The aim, as already noted, is to attract readers in the cutthroat competition which has seen newspaper sales plunge to the bottom through, partly, the advent of television and social media.

This is also attributable to the arrival to the media scene of a new crop of journalists who, despite being professionally well educated, are unfortunately lazy, hence their resort to stories stemming from press conferences, workshops, seminars and press releases.

The problem is further compounded, through the use, by media outlets, of cheap labour. Matters have not been helped by the failure by some media houses to pay their journalists salaries for, sometimes, up to five months.

- **Propaganda:** This is information of especially biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view. During the run-up to the 2015 General Election, one of the mainstream Kiswahili dailies, 'Uhuru', carried a story to the effect that Chadema had sent over 1,000 of its youths to Rwanda for military

training in readiness for causing violence during the polls.

The newspaper did not, however, carry any follow up on the serious story they had published and which did not quote, or refer to, any sources that would have given credence to their story. What was perhaps more intriguing was that despite carrying such a story, which had implications on the security of the nation, it was never reported that heads of the country's security organs moved to question the newspaper editor over his reporter's sources. But the fact that the story was published during the election campaigns, it was not difficult to link it to an attempt to mudsling the Opposition.

- **Media Advocacy for Good National Causes:**

Apart from its important role of informing, educating and entertaining the society, local media should not abandon advocacy role, especially for good, national causes which include, among other things, the fight against violation of press freedom and human rights.

One of the best ways for agitating for press freedom is for all media outlets in the country to be in the forefront in terms of providing ample space in their respective media organs, whenever press freedom and human rights are violated.

One good example of media's involvement in fighting for good, national causes is how to deal with the disappearance of people in the country. When the 'Mwananchi' journalist, Azory Gwanda, disappeared over a year ago, only a few newspapers carried his picture and asked questions. Besides the MCL publications, other media outlets did not seem to care over what had happened.

The essence of all media outlets participating in such a cause is that it finally brings pressure on the powers-that-be so that ultimately, they restrain whoever may have been responsible for disappearances or attacks on journalists and other people as they would be forced to think twice before striking again.

Leaving one or a handful of media outlets to fight against such violations is dangerous as it would be quite easy for the powers to deal with them through a variety of tactics which include denial of advertisements and open threats against such media organs or individual journalists as it has already happened not in the distant past.