

Workshop Takeaway Notes

CBA: Live in Kingston

Sian Kevill, Former Director BBC World News and Editor of BBC's Newsnight programme

Monday July 18th - Tuesday
July 19th 2011

Session 1: The role of the Journalist in a Democracy

Media and Democracy - group work

Key role: To hold those in power to account

- promote accountability and transparency: make sense of something in a way that enables people to understand and make informed choices.
- inform public debate: test information on key issues to help the public understand and debate decisions on their behalf
- pursue matters in the public interest: make available to the public information that it needs to conduct its business. Remember there can be different publics with different interests.
- prevent deception, fraud and corruption
- expose crime and anti-social behaviour - especially of public figures
- reporting from parts of the world on issues of significance eg climate change or where your government's actions have effects

Delivered by upholding core journalistic values

- being trusted to give an accurate account of the facts and tell the truth - or not to deceive
- be impartial: You must 'actively seek out and weigh the relevant arguments on any issue and present them fairly and without bias'.
- be independent: You have a duty to resist pressure from all sides seeking to keep the coverage on their agenda.
- Be open, transparent and accountable to contributors and audiences: be prepared to account for your decisions and correct mistakes at first opportunity.
- seek to engage all citizens reflecting their different interests, cultures and levels of education. Report the significant in a relevant timely and interesting way.

Pressures and challenges that can impede this role being done.

- Political pressure
- pressure of vested interest groups eg NGOs
- pressure of state-controlled media
- commercial pressures
- threats or violence
- lack of editorial support/ outlets for your work
- blogs; new media alternative views
- using libel/law to intimidate

Group Work on a Journalist Main tasks: Improving skills

Areas for discussion:

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- reporting - approaching the facts without preconceptions. Role in explaining and analysing policy
- challenging vested interests - source reports and test reliability. Beware of giving dissidence and opposition to power an easy ride
- interviewing/questioning those in power
- accessible programming - serving all citizens with diff interests, cultures and levels of education. How to empower people and bring in voices other than those in power;
- NB Complaints and compliance processes - also key in giving and maintaining confidence in your journalism as is rigorous editorial debate and controls

(Group work results – see Group Report Feedback which will be circulated separately.)

Session 2: Meeting the Challenges to a Journalist's Role

These are pressures faced by journalists all over the world.

Key issues :

1.) Be first or be right ? Value of verification vs assertion ? Should those who report be different from those who give their opinions

2.) Resource challenge. Our media houses are outgrowing the advertising revenues available. Big media groups are expanding to survive and threatening the smaller groups who are struggling. In these media organisations there are huge pressures leading to:

- media workers need to deliver stories on all platforms - radio/print/internet etc. Can the journalist get it right under these pressures.
- The overreliance on press releases run as fillers.

3.) Investigating Corruption and wrongdoing without being hit by the libel laws. We are asking those who are most likely to be impacted by the reform of the laws to agree to them. There is still danger of huge libel awards eg Anthony Abrahams vs The Gleaner which would bankrupt most smaller groups. This is still a challenge

But the chilling effect is less chilling because there has been some liberalisation eg establishing the notion of responsible journalism. If you get the essence right - even if not right in all of the detail, that is a defence. Secondly where the matter is in the public interest and the organisation makes a good faith effort to tell the story, even if the story turns out to be inaccurate the journalist would benefit from qualified privilege.

However the scale of libel rewards can lead to self censorship.

Wikileaks – Gleaner partnership. 68 cables published out of 1700. 13 were embarrassing to the government; 12 related to the opposition and most of the rest were 'pro Jamaican' ie Prime Ministers standing up to US etc; and some with intriguing personal details. Should the decision not to publish 1632 be their decision?

4.) Collaboration with civil society and those on the internet . How can we build alliances with civil society groups to encourage better governance. Often single issue groups. How sceptical should we be dealing with such groups? eg environmental group stories.

And how do we use the 'people formerly known as the audience'. They can produce their own materials. They are creators now. We have the opportunity to enhance our coverage but care must be taken too to validate their reports. How do we deal with internet gossip – do we cover it ? if we don't will we be accused of covering things up?

(Group work feedback will be circulated separately)

Session 3: Media and Democracy in a Dynamic Environment

The dynamic of the internet: extra thoughts:

No journalist or media organisation can ignore Twitter/ Facebook/ Blogs/Internet.

They are now integral to the way we must work

- improving our journalism : source of contacts, ideas and expertise. “ there is always someone out there who knows more than you do”.
- enriching our coverage : Ordinary people now playing active role in collecting and spreading the news, providing compelling eye witness reports.
- barometer of trends and gauge of public opinion.
- getting closer to our audiences - Use it to build up a following and distribute news and get comments from readers and audience. Blogs are a great way to allow a journalist to establish his professional credentials.
- But what is also becoming clearer is the interplay between social media responses and the mainstream television networks: it was this that toppled News Corp over the News of the World hacking scandal.

There is a huge responsibility to get reporting of internet stories right. You must have guidelines on both:

- how to use information gathered from the internet eg applying normal editorial standards to authenticate material;
- how to behave on the internet eg on Twitter or Facebook do not say anything that you would not say in public and be careful what information you give out.

But the internet is also creating dramatic new news stories. One of the biggest impacts of the growth of the Internet is a loss of control among traditional institutions of power.

It is changing the nature of political engagement and we need to be aware and able to meet these new challenges

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- helped create new political voices and networks.
- empowered new groups
- offered new ways to break the monopoly on information. eg wikileaks eg It is a lot faster and easier now to catch both politicians and governments when they make mistakes or try to cover things up – and hold them accountable
- internet has begun to tear down traditional political and geographic borders -- recently used by external groups to show “irregularities” in the first round of the Zimbabwe elections

But digital changes also threatens the media’s traditional power as well.

- commercial viability: Papers circulation declining. News being found through aggregators, social media recommendation.
- dominance of communications: Politicians and governments increasingly using Facebook to connect with their supporter and the public. This way they can side-step the traditional media and put over their message directly without being edited by journalists. Malaysia’s PM uses twitter regularly posting messages several times a day and soliciting people’s opinions.
- the very role of a journalist: very influential and reputable bloggers command as much attention as mainstream media organisations.

Session 4: Elections: The Extra Responsibilities of a Good Journalist

“All broadcast outlets, large or small, rich or poor, have a public service duty to contribute to free and fair elections in any way they can. Radio and Tv create and foster the democratic environment by telling the truth, by investigating the hidden, by explaining the background, by presenting the facts so that a well informed electorate can make reasoned choices” (Commonwealth Broadcasting Guidelines)

Key components of campaign coverage

The real test of a broadcaster’s commitment to impartiality is in the way it reports elections and election campaigns. Please read the CBA : Elections in Small Countries pamphlet.

Issues uncovered in the election planning workshop:

- preparing for an election – always plan!
- Create the right liaison point with political parties and election officials
- Always aim to achieve balance – log your coverage so you can rebut complaints of bias
- fair coverage – don’t forget to give coverage to the smaller parties and independents
- reporting the campaign – plan how to cover the main parties; the main electoral battlegrounds and the issues that need to be covered – even if the parties do not bring them up in the campaign themselves.

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- covering manifestos – fact checking is an important role both on manifestos and on campaign policy claims.
- daily political campaigning – don't just do a press release; dig a bit; find out if there is a good story
- internet and social media – have someone monitoring new outlets eg twitter and facebook and creating reports. These will be increasingly important sources.
- complaints procedures – have someone to deal with complaints to take pressure off the reporter on the ground
- create an online area where all information can be gathered and accessed by the election team; have regular meetings to exchange information and discuss editorial issues
- polls – think about how to contextualise them... always show the trends and the results against the context of all other polls for the campaign. The BBC never leads on a poll result – for discussion!
- polling day – no coverage that could influence a voters' choice

More Information

BBC iLearn: Election Reporting Module

LinkedIn Group: Caribbean Political Media

www.cba.org.uk

[CBA Editorial Guidelines](#) by Mary Raine