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Media: Reporting Human Rights Issues

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ACCURACY AND CONSISTENCY: ESTABLISHING  
NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS  
AS TRUSTED SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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1. In recent years, the human rights dimension has become more pronounced as a consideration by the media. How does journalism deal with the selection and angling of a human rights story? What is the role of journalists — merely providers of information on which others make judgement, or is it more complex? How does one deal with pollution or corruption of human rights information?
2. How should the media's performance in providing accurate, reliable, relevant and timely information on human rights around the world be judged? How do journalists and editors who work in the media judge themselves when they try to assess the quality of their reporting of human rights issues? How do their 'human rights' tasks compare with all their other tasks? What pressures are brought to bear on them by parties that may be concerned by their reporting? What would 'good' reporting on human rights issues imply?

HUMAN RIGHTS INFORMATION

3. Governments and political leaders now refer to human rights more often than they did, both in their formal statements of policy and in political rhetoric. Public opinion has similarly evolved. The amount of coverage of human rights issues in the media is likely to continue to rise. For

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similar reasons, too, there may be higher expectations about the precision of that coverage, and the quality of that transmission.

4. Although it is not necessarily more important than other forms of information, information on human rights has specific characteristics. Similarly, since human rights information is subject to constant struggle in the public sphere, the media stand at the centre of a highly political process, which has to be understood in terms of a production cycle influenced by several actors. The report analyses the nature and quality of the internal media process and the exchange on human rights between the media and those organisations that seek to influence them, and delves into the difficulty of communicating effectively complicated information (e.g., separating systematically editorialising and news-reporting, dealing with the velocity of coverage).

## HUMAN RIGHTS AS A NEWS TOPIC

5. During the 1990s, human rights issues acquired a stronger resonance. This global interest was echoed by an upsurge in media coverage of human rights stories. The human rights dimension became more strongly pronounced as a consideration both in selecting stories to cover and in choosing how to cover them. The mass media cover human rights issues increasingly and more systematically. Certain places have a more powerful influence on this process than others do. Influence tends to be concentrated in Northern capitals where powerful governments and influential media organisations are located.
6. Although journalists have expanded coverage of human rights into new areas — a positive development that ought to be noted — *a large number of stories that are about human rights remain underplayed by the media*. It is difficult to estimate whether the increase in coverage of human rights in conflict has been to the detriment of coverage of human rights issues in less visible, slow or protracted situations. Human rights are still taken largely to mean political and civil rights, and economic, social and cultural rights remain absent from media coverage or underreported.
7. *How well the media cover, explicate and analyse the human rights apparatus is less apparent*. Human rights advocates observe that data on human rights violations and issues are not lacking, but the impact of this information on the public is not as great as human rights activists expected. One consequence is that many human rights activists have had to refine their approach to public information and advocacy.
8. The media miss human rights stories because they *do not pay attention* to human rights per se and because of *inadequate understanding* of the material they are covering. The media also *miss the context* of human rights stories. The professional value of the reporting is diminished by these shortcomings. These failures indicate that the journalistic profession should search for (or improve existing) reportorial and editorial standards that would enhance the accuracy and consistency of their human rights reporting.
9. There is little agreement on whether the media are doing a good job of covering this 'beat'. Part of the difficulty is that human rights involve questions of law, morality and political philosophy as well as practical problems and how to deal with them; journalism is concerned with facts-on-the-ground, what-happened-when.
10. From the media's point of view, a question that occurs repeatedly is whether human rights issues are news in their own right, or whether they are news only when they are associated with other news. News organisations and the media collectively can put out a lot of information about human rights, but they have no inherent obligation to say everything. Just as they have to be selective about stories, they cannot privilege human rights sources over others. This argument

emerges from a number of journalists interviewed for the report when asked about the quantity and quality of their human rights coverage. Put simply, the argument is that it is not the role of a news organisation to consider what is done with information it circulates. Its function is to obtain it, verify it and make it known.

## THE CHANGING PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT OF JOURNALISTS

11. The media's ability to cover human rights in a consistent and accurate manner is limited by transformations that are affecting currently the media landscape, particularly the proliferation of news outlets and the concentration of news ownership, and the decline in international coverage.
12. The marked trend towards *concentration* of the media industry reflects the wider process of global concentration in the private sector. Significant mergers of newspapers and wire services have taken place internationally. Organisations from the traditional 'news' and business news sectors have combined in large multimedia groupings with organisations that specialise in entertainment.
13. This restructuring has significant implications for organisations that work in the field of human rights. Those who gain access to the main sources of broadcast news can, at a stroke, reach a much larger audience. At the same time, competition for time and access is fiercer, and specific professional skills are required to accommodate the institutional culture and technology of the dominant news distributors. Originators of news are less able to dictate the content of news reports they inspire. Similarly, corporate interests may influence policies regarding distribution of politically sensitive news such as information on human rights.
14. *The process is dominated by downsizing, dumbing down and 'infotaining'*. Nowadays, news flows extremely fast, no outlet can expect to control or monopolise a story for more than a few hours and the skills of production are dominated by the need to process volumes of information efficiently and co-ordinate its distribution, rather than by essentially editorial skills. Under the pressure of these changes, new and competitive values have come to influence the presentation and character of news in several respects.
15. There is a great deal of anxiety within journalism over the erosion of quality of media content in recent years. Journalists, like other media professionals, have to take their share of responsibility for this decline, but around the reporters' desk there are corrosive agents at work, both within and outside media, which are weakening good journalism.
16. News is all-pervasive. The news output of the dominant providers is standardised. There is little difference in content between the information given by different providers. In practice, the large media corporations do not question one another's journalistic values or priorities — even though they are in fierce competition for audience. Newsgathering operations have reduced serious analysis. Programmers adapt programme content to appeal to the largest audiences.
17. In consequence, consumers of news have fewer opportunities to assess the information they consume. News outlets will replay immediate footage of an event ad nauseam but will rarely address the complexity or the origins or context of a human rights issue or situation. The argument is that it is simply too difficult and expensive and time-consuming to do so. For similar reasons, news producers tend to shy away from complex human rights stories that have no clear-cut sides or answers.
18. The trend to superficiality is reinforced wherever news is integrated into programming as one element of an entertainment package. Human rights issues become 'stories' or 'human interest stories', forced to adhere to certain emotional clichés. Since the content of news programmes is

very similar, competition between the providers of news leads them to focus less on content than presentation. Programmes are built around the presenter's personality, thereby personalising the content of news. Others present information in terms of antagonistic debates. These techniques emphasise presentation rather than content and lead to simplification of the information imparted and a general loss of perspective. This has led to a number of negative factors in terms of accuracy and consistency in the coverage of international human rights stories. The drive for efficiency is leading to errors in the newsroom.

19. Discussion of human rights concerns the interpretation of national or international law — implying an approach that clearly aspires to objective judgements based on agreed standards and evidence. At the same time, it is a discourse that appeals to emotions, in ways that are both powerful and politicised. This is the ambiguous terrain in which the journalist must work.

## THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

20. To understand what drives the agenda in newsrooms when it comes to human rights issues, it is necessary to dissect the reporting and editorial decision-making processes, as well as the factors influencing the editorial culture. The editorial process being itself a form of filtering, the question becomes which filters operate, how and when.
21. **Reporting is essentially reactive.** Journalists' fundamental dilemma is the demand to gather and produce news on a daily (sometimes hourly) basis, and at the same time having to ponder about it. One of the professional challenges of the media is to maintain a rich texture of coverage even while keeping the angle current. The breaking news culture distracts from the time needed for editorial and ethical reflection, which is key to human rights reporting.
22. **The editorial selection process is fundamentally event-determined.** Since the real motivation of the news people in treating a story with a human rights content is not generally to redress a wrong but to share in a collective sensitivity over a particular issue at a given time, they do not feel the necessity to pursue the coverage when they feel that the public attention wanes on that issue. More generally, the news-driven information culture leaves wide areas of human rights issues uncovered.
23. **Newsworthiness is inevitably subjective.** A definition of what is newsworthy can come only from within the news organisation. Though this question causes much frustration, it is a fundamental rule that in a free society the news organisation is the absolute master of its own affairs. This dimension of journalism (and the essence of a free press) is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the moral imperative of human rights issues.
24. **The editorial environment is typically information-loaded.** Consequently, the information that human rights NGOs send to the media arrives with a great deal of competition for the relevant editors' attention. In many instances, human rights will be just one of several issues in any given story. This is true in well-endowed editorial environments and poorer ones.
25. **Angling is inherently constraining.** Why one angle should be favoured rather than another is a matter of the news editor's judgement in relation to three questions: what is the most substantial or striking feature of the story? How does the story fit with what has been said recently about the region or the subject (if anything has been said)? What matters to the audience? The response to these questions usually determines the choice of angle. This is one reason why human rights angles are rarely the lead. If a story is important enough to get into the news, there are usually implications beyond the human rights dimension.

26. **Reporting is determined by the interplay between reporter and editor.** There is often tension between journalists on the ground and the editors at headquarters, particularly in the case of human rights. The space between where the story originates and where the decision on how and whether to go with the story (or alter it) takes place is important. Several interviewees were of the opinion that individual characters can still influence the selection of stories and that there is still a role for journalists to impose some of their criteria and push through constraints.

## IMPEDIMENTS TO GOOD HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING

27. It is not just the way that journalists work and the tools they use that define the modern editorial culture and which influence the coverage of human rights. A number of factors have the effect of misrepresenting or marginalising human rights issues.
28. **Bias.** There is always an element of bias in journalism. Ideological biases and differences exist, though they are rarely acknowledged as such. Political, organisational, cultural and linguistic biases have an impact on what stories and events are selected in human rights coverage. Bias also plays a part to the extent that news organisations reflect (whether or not they agree with them) the interests and perception of the country in which they are located. Biases affect the most fundamental part of journalism's mission, namely that of informing the public in the most complete, objective, accurate and fair manner.
29. **Instrumentalisation.** There is a tendency for human rights issues to be used for manipulation purposes or propaganda rhetoric. Governments that are party to an international conflict engage in such instrumentalisation. This begs the question of the professional responsibility of journalists in making this apparent to the public and making them understand the coded references used, rather than submitting to one party's phraseology. For journalists to use governmental terminology (such as 'the war against terrorism') is an abdication of their professional responsibility to report and explain. It also highlights the problem of the media's central role as independent and objective observers being dragged into a conflict as players.
30. **Selectivity.** The media must be selective in what they report. A newspaper or magazine has only so many pages, a television channel or radio station has only so much broadcast time. News is not just (or even mainly) about human rights, and it is neither fair nor realistic to imagine that the media will have the same agenda as human rights organizations.
31. **Pollution.** Admittedly, no information is 'pure' — it is shaped, massaged, delivered, received and interpreted many times over before delivery. Yet contamination of the information transmitted is particularly detrimental to human rights coverage. Journalistic standards are not met when coverage is cryptic, ambiguous or timid — let alone consciously distorted.
32. **Reductionism.** Discussion of human rights tends to be monolithic with the variety and complexity of the issues being reduced to discrete situations in particular corners of the world. Sweeping generalisations, rather than articulated and precise reporting, tend to dominate. The 'herd mentality' is another factor of reductionism as some media organisations fear not covering what their peers are covering.
33. **Sensationalism and negativism.** Human rights stories that make the newsroom cut tend to be grim and depicted graphically. Failure (of states, of individuals, of societies) and despair are emphasised. Legitimate reports of bad news fail to explain causes, and often attribute developments in a way that stigmatises actors and places.

34. ***Absence of context.*** Human rights issues are rarely put in proper context. There are elementary givens about the nature of an issue, a conflict or an actor that the media often do not provide. At a point, failure to explain undermines the ability of reports to communicate information that is essential to readers, viewers or listeners if they are to understand what is transpiring. An inability to place events in context constitutes an obstacle to understanding, which is key when it comes to human rights.

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMUNITY AND THE MEDIA

35. The wider political and human rights agendas are merging into a new strategic undertaking that commands a new approach from journalists and media. Equally, human rights NGOs must decide whether they can be independent in the information market (at the risk of playing a marginal role in the news process) or whether they should they try to influence the news agenda (knowing that this will require compromises to be made).
36. ***There are serious limitations to the commonality of interests of human rights organisations and media outlets.*** News organisations do not consider human rights stories as such, as inherently more important than any others, whereas human rights organisations do. The dilemma for NGOs is to keep the media interested without trivialising or sensationalising the issues they want to see aired. A main problem is that often the information that human rights organisations provide is not tailored to meet the media's needs. In content or expression, the information is perceived as inappropriate, mistimed or simply unreliable. This raises issues of training and capacity building in the effective use of media.
37. ***Still, some NGOs have a definite influence on media coverage of human rights*** and other subjects. Large NGOs and some smaller ones have responded to the new media environment by developing media operations. In the last ten years, almost all the large human rights, development, humanitarian and environmental organisations have established press offices to place information with the media. Some publish extensively and are an influential source of information in their field, for the media, governments and other institutions.
38. Human rights advocacy and organisations have also played an increasingly important role in turning the media's attention to issues that were previously ignored or unknown, or reviving issues in protracted and slow crises situations and turning them into news. Often, this has led to more accurate, more complete and more consistent coverage.
39. ***To communicate their information, human rights organisations need to become knowledgeable about how news is produced, selected and structured.*** Whereas the media demand simplicity, directness, narrative, simple structure and personalisation, standard human rights reports are neither prepared nor presented as such. What is more, coverage does not necessarily lead to attention, and attention does not necessarily lead to understanding.
40. ***A media-focused campaigning strategy has several consequences.*** Professional press offices are effective, but competitive. Attempts to collaborate are frequent but only partially successful. The information that NGOs market becomes subject to the same pressures as other media information. It is more effective if it is simple, if it is written in soundbites, if it rides a strong news angle, if there is a personal interest story attached and so on. This pressure invites NGOs to collude with trends in the mainstream media, even though they may as a result present an image of their organisations that is inaccurate and simplistic. This situation is an invitation to certain kinds of distortions — and these need not be dishonest distortions.

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA PERSPECTIVES

41. The vastly different political, economic and cultural conditions under which the media of different countries operate have an impact on coverage of human rights. Working conditions determine in significant ways the manner in which the media can address, or not, issues of public interest, including human rights. There are also historically specific experiences and circumstances that create perhaps not a variable hierarchy of values but at least a different practical, realistic sense of what must come first.
42. ***A two-way avenue.*** Space for human rights stories in countries with no or limited freedom of the press can be created by first publishing in the international and regional media or in the media in a neighbouring country. However, domestic coverage of human rights issues tends to be self-generated and not so dependent on international sources. Local groups need international organisations more for legitimisation than for original information. They can communicate through an evolving local media.
43. ***Sourcing.*** Too often international media will only pick up a story once a Northern human rights organisation has brought attention to it, rarely going with a human rights story that local human rights NGOs or the local media have published. Whenever these stories are published, international media rarely name local NGOs and media as sources thereby offering no acknowledgement or protection to the originators of the story.
44. ***Stringers.*** The squeeze in resources for international coverage in international media has led to a trend of hiring correspondents from the local communities. This provides an opportunity for those reporters to better cover their community and to pass on knowledge and skills when working for local media. At the same time, these correspondents are more exposed as a result of covering sensitive human rights issues.
45. ***Different professional environments.*** Northern journalists benefit from a better material environment than their Southern colleagues. They also benefit from a greater sense of security. In addition, the domestic legal context is less friendly to journalists in many countries in southern latitudes than it is in the global media centres. For journalists who have experienced the denial of their own human rights, the question of whether or how to report them has a far greater degree of urgency.
46. ***Differing commitments and priorities.*** In general, journalists in many non-Western media are more likely to identify themselves with a struggle for human rights than their Northern counterparts who tend to conflate less often journalism and human rights activism. Several Western journalists interviewed for the report argued that the job of the media is to communicate information objectively and accurately, and that identification with human rights issues is dangerous to the degree that it undermines the fundamental role of media organisations. By contrast, Southern media — especially the printed press — often address human rights matters in an overtly partisan way as part of a general movement for more freedom in their societies. They claim the same ethical commitment to telling the truth as the Western journalist, but several regard the notion that journalists can be impartial observers of society as unrealistic and ideological. A superficial application of the ‘just the news’ or the ‘only what is newsworthy’ rule dear to Western journalists (working in an environment usually favourable to human rights issues) can produce misinformation just as much as ideologically motivated slanting of the news.

## CONCLUSIONS

47. There now exists a consensus among news professionals and human rights activists that *the media are more receptive to human rights issues today than at any time in the modern history* of the media — though the consensus does not extend to saying that the media cover the subject well.
48. Many journalists interviewed argued that *the promotion of human rights, as such, is not necessarily the media's responsibility*. A significant portion also said that human rights needed to be promoted (if only by getting the facts out). A variety of attitudes exist among journalists. The vast majority agreed that better-informed and more astute reporting processes are necessary.
49. It also emerged that human rights issues are reported more than they are covered. *Rights issues get into the coverage but do not lead the story*. Whether they do so, and how they do so, will depend on how deeply editors want to go into the stories concerned. From the perspective of human rights advocates, there is a positive dimension to this.
50. Human rights are seen as an element that should be factored into any relevant story, informing the analysis of all news. The weakness is that *rights issues, although included, are not articulated as such*. Such absence of explanatory analysis constitutes professional (not ethical) dereliction since if a human rights angle is not understood it lessens the completeness of coverage, or prevents those who receive the information from understanding what it means.
51. The tenets of responsible journalism are contradicted by some of the trends characterising coverage of human rights. The evolution of international human rights law, its more explicit use as a point of reference by governments, and the growing complexity of many of the reporting issues that arise, suggest that *the media have to address seriously the way they cover issues and their responsibility to do so accurately*. This may require new forms of training for journalists on three main fronts.
52. **Ignorance of what human rights are.** Among many journalists, there is a serious lack of knowledge of what human rights are. Human rights are almost reflexively regarded (wrongly) as being related to reporting of conflict. The media have a professional obligation to understand what these rights are, in order to be able to portray and better explain the world to their audience.
53. **Ignorance of where human rights are.** Human rights are usually seen and presented as being located abroad. Here too, it is almost a reflexive response to questions about human rights to refer to foreign coverage. This is not merely a matter of how something is labelled, but how it is conceived of.
54. **Ignorance of the scope of human rights.** The corollary to placing constantly rights in conflict situations and abroad is that the media often see human rights in terms of a narrow spectrum of civil and political rights. Social, economic and cultural rights are almost entirely absent from the human rights discourse of the media.
55. In a larger sense, the issue is whether the media can be accurate in its coverage and can cover a human rights issue at hand consistently, in ways that *give the audience enough depth of background and continuity of coverage to form a properly informed notion*. By consistency is meant, as well, the media's ability to cover different stories with a high or at least the same standard of fairness and accuracy.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **General**

56. The quality of the media coverage of human rights should be improved in terms of accuracy of the stories reported, consistency among the issues addressed and expertise on the matters presented.
57. Coverage of economic, cultural and social rights should be as systematic as coverage of civil and political rights.
58. Newsworthiness of human rights issues should not be confined to crisis situations and particular geographical (Southern) settings.
59. Editors and producers should demonstrate (journalistic) leadership in tackling human rights issues professionally and responsibly. They should organise newsroom discussions of these issues.
60. Journalists should acquire knowledge, develop erudition and expertise and be more discerning about human rights.

### **Accountability**

61. Editors and producers should institute internal review procedures. The review and audit processes should be periodic, and should include a 'post mortem' quality control.
62. Editors and producers should surface criticism within the newsroom, and encourage their staff to do so vertically and horizontally.
63. Answerability to readers, viewers and listeners should be taken seriously. Transparency ought to be implemented.

### **Objectivity and credibility**

64. Journalists should not confuse facts with opinions. Reporting should be distinguished clearly and unambiguously from editorialising.
65. Explain (an issue) rather than tell (a story).
66. Avoid (actively) politicisation and bias. It is possible to be committed while remaining fair.
67. Journalists should be receptive to criticism from human rights organisations.

### **Independence**

68. Governments should not interfere with journalists' freedom of movement, and should ensure that journalists have access to information. Prohibition from government interference should be guaranteed statutorily.

69. Media organisations should ensure the safety of their reporters. Assignments for correspondents in the field should take into account security issues.
70. Human rights organisations should respect the independence of journalists, and the editorial integrity of media outlets.
71. Human rights organisations should point out and document instances of bias by media organisations and by journalists.

### **Diversity**

72. Newsroom staff should be ethnically and professionally diverse.
73. Representativity, including gender representation, should be reviewed periodically.

### **Education**

74. Journalists reporting on human rights issues should be familiar with the international human rights instruments.
75. Journalists should be trained on human rights issues. A mid-career training should follow initial training. In-house training should be supplemented by retraining at independent structures (foundations, schools and so forth).
76. Media organisations should organise awareness raising programmes (seminars, meetings, and workshops) devoted to human rights issues, and encourage their journalists to attend them.
77. A framework for co-operation between human rights organisations and media organisations should be established to address the general journalistic deficit of knowledge about human rights issues, within a professional dialogue.
78. Human rights organisations should familiarise themselves with the structures and processes of the journalistic profession.

### **Contextualisation and quality**

79. Human rights issues need to be explained in their context, and reporting needs to go beyond discrete incidents to include the human rights issues surrounding them.
80. Journalists must avoid simplifying complex matters, and must present human rights issues in their full historical, political, socio-economic and cultural contexts, with a view to deepen the audience's understanding of the issue.
81. Journalists should broaden the sweep of human rights coverage and pay attention to the different aspects of a human rights story.
82. Human rights processes should be covered as much as events.
83. Time and space (and energy and resources) should be allocated to set human rights segments in proper context.

## **Terminology**

84. For legal reasons as well as for the sake of giving the audience all the facts, or as many as possible, news organisations must choose terms clearly, carefully and explain the origins of the terms. Journalists should avoid using the loaded terminologies employed by those in power, and not reinforce them in their own reporting.
85. Journalists should familiarise themselves with human rights terminology. There should be an editorial imperative to be very clear on what is referred to.
86. Journalists should avoid stigmatising particular groups of people, or specific countries or regions. Guilt (finger pointing) or innocence (cheerleading) by association should be avoided. Identity should not be labelled in terms of race or colour.

## **Support**

87. Governments should demonstrate a greater commitment not to interfere with media coverage. Media autonomy should be regulated and supported.
88. International organisations, including international financial institutions, should strive to assist the media in developing countries. Funds should be allocated to support independent media operations.
89. There ought to be more complementarity between the international media and the national media to open up the atmosphere or space for local media to develop their coverage of human rights. International media need to do their job better by looking at stories by local media and acknowledge that local interpretations are legitimate, and use and name local sources.