

## ETHICAL ASPECTS OF REPORTING ON ETHNIC MINORITIES

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In Croatia, discussion has been going on for more than a decade now on ethics in the media. Everyone agrees the situation is bad. Careful media analysts conclude that the situation is still considerably better than in the time of “neither war nor peace” of the nineties. Then, clear messages of media instigation of ethnic intolerance were entirely natural and occurring every day. That was a time completely unburdened by media ethics, and war, destruction, hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons, struggle for Croatian independence – were just excuses for the majority, state-run media. After all, do not today’s court trials clearly show that then calls for public liquidation of the ethnically “unwelcome” were a result of a systematic lack of ethics and professionalism in the media. In other words, a part of the media did not respect even fundamental human rights, especially of members of the Serb ethnic minority. That time is behind us, as is hate speech, which in 1990, almost overnight, had become an integral part of reporting, and had taken quite a long time to disappear from everyday use. The beginning of serious awareness of ethical problems in the Croatian media was the Government’s appeal to the media in mid-1997 when Croatian politicians realized that some journalists from pro-government papers had become “loose cannons” and called on them to use language based on tolerance, moderation and coexistence.

Ethical incidents certainly exist, but tones of ethnic intolerance and politically incorrect language are far rarer, at least in the top daily and weekly papers that reach minorities. Reactions to cases of non-ethics are no longer reduced just to reports and statements by the Croatian Helsinki Committee, Civil Committee on Human Rights, *Feral Tribune* and *Novi List*. Namely, unthinkable until recently, today even from top political positions one can hear critical reactions to sporadic attempts to instigate ethnic intolerance. Different political language is in use and thus reactions to cases of

journalistic non-professionalism, rashness, immoderation and poor editorial moves are – more convincing and frequent.

### **Journalist Ethics and Reporting on Ethnic Minorities**

What is ethics? The most common and shortest answers are goodness, right-mindedness, fairness, justness, responsibility, virtue, honesty, worthiness, morals, morality. Ethics as a philosophical discipline is an awareness of morality, whose task is to let us know what morality is and what are its components, and to take a stand on existing moral practice. Every profession, including the journalistic one, has its ethical principles. The only question is how and when journalists apply it and how much it is an integral part of their everyday work. When we speak of reporting on ethnic minorities, consideration of ethical principles is one of the most important preconditions of consistent professional journalism. Fairness and balance are essential prerequisites of an ethical approach to an issue, event or person. A feeling of compassion for victims, especially all ethnic minorities, is a constituent part of journalistic ethics. The journalist Danko Plevnik speaks about the importance of journalists cherishing their own humanity, maintaining that humanity is the “foundation of the ability to accept and apply professional ethics,” and that “sporadic and occasional application of ethical norms” is a “professional downfall.” Accepting Plevnik’s recommendation as a general statement on the issue of reporting on sensitive minority issues, one should remember that it is precisely journalist inconsistency in practicing ethics that as a rule leads to reinforcement of stereotype and spreading of prejudice. Newspaper headlines such as the ones about Romanies being thieves or rapists or about female Ukrainians being women of suspicious dealings directly result from a superficial approach burdened by stereotype that the media is known for promoting. Minorities deserve, to say the least, additional sensitivity and the same approach as any other majority in society. Or, as the international communication expert McQuail writes, the elements of media ethics that every journalist should consider, equal for all categories, are: truthfulness, honesty, impartiality, fairness, respect for privacy, independence of individual interests, responsibility toward social assets, abidance by law, morality, decency and good taste. But, often, even a cursory glance at some newspaper headlines and articles shows exactly the opposite when it comes to ethnic minorities. A similar opinion is shared by the majority of theoreticians of media ethics, and Patterson and Wilkins promote an

interesting characterization of “ethical common sense” to help journalists take the right approach to minorities. They insist on dignity of all persons, reciprocity (the same for others as for oneself), accuracy of available information, persistence (reaching all sources), fairness and respect for differences. The rules of “ethical common sense” can certainly help journalists make decisions more easily in everyday work, but they cannot solve the – very often – evident bias and open unfairness to members of certain minority groups. After all, changing a stand takes time, but what is most important, as the American theoretician Merrill writes, is an **earnest intention** to systematically consider media ethics.

### **Most Common Violations of Ethical Principles in Majority Media**

Very often, the gravest forms of violation of ethics are observed in the majority media. In ethnic minority cases, forms of violation of ethics can be reduced to the following five most common ones:

- 1) consciously suppressing facts,
- 2) consciously presenting and conveying prejudice,
- 3) consciously avoiding to look at all sides in a conflict,
- 4) using politically incorrect language,
- 5) consciously promoting intolerance

Deliberate and conscious suppression of facts is actually untruthful reporting. Very often in conflicts or disagreements between members of a minority people and the majority people, one can observe a lack of political will to investigate important facts that might cast a different light on an issue or sometimes be more favorable for the minority members. In Croatian newsrooms in the majority national media, there is a negligent number of – Romanians, for instance – who could certainly bring the necessary balance to their reports on the living problems and social status of this ethnic minority. It is, therefore, not surprising that in countries where the Romanians constitute a significant minority, such as Hungary, Romany journalists undergo different additional journalism education cycles to work for the national media where they can contribute to a balanced approach to covering events and the life not just of their own minority, but of the majority people as well.

Conscious expression of prejudice characterizes non-ethics in majority media with regard to minorities. There has been a lot of such clumsiness and very unpleasant sentence structures or editorial interventions in papers in Croatia's past. Today it is rarer but, nevertheless, representatives of the Croatian Helsinki Committee even today will highlight the problem of conflict-causing editorial interventions in some headlines about minorities. The headline "Police chief: Local Serbs are dirty and they curse" is a rash headline, especially if it does not name the person who said that – at least not in the article itself. In addition, it burdens even more the already tense inter-ethnic relations if it is written in the context of living difficulties in Vukovar. The journalist certainly should not hide the truth, but he must be fair and write who had said this in public. The journalist is expected in his comment, provided such a sentence was uttered, to explain the foolishness of generalization and the passing of rash verdicts on the part of a state official and, on top of that, a person charged with protecting public law and order!

Consciously avoiding looking at all sides in a conflict is a third form of violation of ethics in coverage of minorities. A textbook example of a case of this kind was the description of the case of segregation of Romany children in schools in Medjimurje. A local paper regularly covered the escalation of a conflict between majority Croat children and their parents and Romany children. One does not have to be a great media expert to notice that far more space and opportunity was given to the "threatened" Croat side to express its opinion than to the Romanies. Who, then, is the "threatened" side?!

Use of politically incorrect language is also a typical form of violation of ethics in depicting minority peoples. Using the term Gypsies instead of Romanies, Sciptars instead of Albanians, Muslims instead of Bosniaks, today means being politically incorrect. There is disagreement on the use of the above terms because some believe it is not such a big mistake to use incorrect language if even "they" call themselves that. Perhaps "they" can call themselves that, but a correct journalistic approach requires elementary respect for official names. And, certainly, avoiding anything that might insult members of individual minority peoples.

Ethical common sense requires journalists in all articles and items to make effort to promote tolerance and language of tolerance, especially in communities still recovering from the consequences of war and inter-ethnic conflict. There are many examples of this. For instance, a conflict between Serb and Croat elementary school students in Beli Manastir, which was used by politicians for their own political purposes. The role of journalists is to investigate the background of the conflict without emotion or passion and to expose political abuse of the conflict.

In Croat majority media, ethics in reporting on minorities is violated most often in cases when minorities occupy the center stage due to tragic events or excesses. Good news is not really news and such tragic and unpleasant events are exploited to the maximum and often end with spreading of prejudice or views on “them” as someone less worthy or “basically” bad people. Editorial interventions in articles are regularly inappropriate and ethically questionable and they do not match what the article brings. Comments sometimes cross the line of elementary decency. To conclude, the biggest damage regarding doubtful articles on minority members is that they are read, heard or watched by most of the majority people.

At the end of this overview of different ways of unethical coverage of minority peoples, their lives and problems, several conclusions can be made:

- minorities do not need positive discrimination in the media; they need fair coverage of events
- journalists and in particular editors of majority media must show a lot more sensitivity to minorities, as well as a critical attitude towards evident errors in coverage of minorities
- young journalists – members of the majority or minority peoples – should be provided with additional education in fair and honest reporting on minorities.

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\* For more on the issue of ethics and journalism, see: Malović Stjepan, Vilović Gordana, Ricchiardi Sherry "Etika novinarstva", Izvori, Zagreb, 1998; Vilović Gordana "Etički prijepori u Globusu i Nacionalu 1999-2000", Fakultet političkih znanosti Biblioteka

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