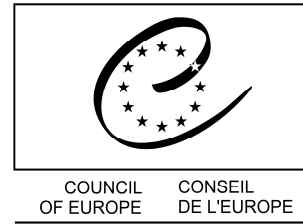




Ministry of Education, Science and Culture



Strasbourg, 21 April 2009

MCM(2009)020

**1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers
responsible for Media and New Communication Services**
A new notion of media?
(28-29 May 2009, Reykjavik, Iceland)

European Federation of Journalist

*Trusting Journalism to
Make the Best of Democracy*

The title of the Ministerial Conference, *A New Notion of Media?* describes the current evolution and restructuring of the media and information landscape. The following paper presents some of the positions of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and identifies questions to be considered during the Conference in Reykjavik.

1. Many Media, One Ethic

In a world of changing technology, in which traditional media platforms converge and consumer media habits change rapidly, the traditional division of journalism between print and broadcasting has become blurred. Moreover, most of the media now add user generated content to the traditional professional content. Codes of ethics have been developed within the press, and newspapers have been fiercely independent of the state and able to operate in relatively free markets whereas broadcasting was regulated by the state in terms of ownership and licences.

For this reason it is not possible any longer simply to perpetuate the newspaper tradition that lies behind existing codes, or to maintain regulations that have controlled the environment of broadcast news for decades. We also have to revisit the relationship between free expression and media freedom and explore the differences between them.

Today free expression, press freedom and truth seeking remain natural allies, particularly when they face common enemies – such as states that impose censorship or use propaganda to shape the public information space.

But it is not enough for us to have the right to express our opinions. We must also have access to quality information that provides context, analysis, and commentary about the complex world in which we live.

The development of “citizen journalism” and the active engagement of people outside the newsroom in news gathering raise new questions of ethical values and responsibility.

For journalists’ unions and associations, journalists, whether freelance or employed as staff journalists, are those who earn the major part of their livelihood from the practice of journalism. They are bound by professional responsibilities and this provides the unifying thread to their work – whether they operate in a print, broadcast or online environment.

The ethical code of conduct guides the way they work and most understand well the principles of their trade and profession. Journalists need to take individual responsibility for their work and most of them want to express the moral dimension of their journalism. Indeed, this is why many journalists were attracted to the job in the first place, but they cannot do any of this unless they work in an environment which respects the right to act according to conscience.

This is not to criticise those who think of themselves as bloggers or citizen journalists, some of whom also have high ethical standards. However, there is an obligation on all those who earn their living from journalism to respect professional standards and to check facts that goes far beyond the individual responsibility on those who do it as amateurs.

The challenging question in the current environment is: how is it possible to tell what is true and what are lies, or wishful thinking? The Internet surfer has no guide to this colourful bazaar of loud voices, many of them strident and opinionated. They must rely on their own ability to judge fact from fiction and to find reliability and consistency. In some ways, we have returned to the days when travelling merchants bring the news, and the same need to know who is reporting and who is dissembling.

In recent years, there have been discussions about “rating” or “approving” websites, however any system for validating bits of the web seems doomed, since the questions about which sites are honest and reliable simply shift to become questions about the integrity and reliability of those who do the validating.

2. “Citizen Journalism” is a Question of Quality

Public engagement in media always existed and technological convergence means that this engagement will stay and develop. For example during accidents or natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami, many of the most evocative and terrible images were captured by tourists and local people on camera phones and hand-held video recorders, providing primary source material for unprecedented media coverage.

Moreover, traditional media use every opportunity to encourage the reader or viewer to participate in their work. Blogging platforms have been introduced by major media and journalism websites are interactive, with the audience encouraged to send in their own images or eyewitness accounts of major news events.

This is leading to fears within journalism that in an age of cost-cutting, media owners may dispense with professional staff altogether and diminish in the process people’s access to reliable information.

However, there is also a growing number of journalists who want to focus on how an active audience can improve coverage and raise the credibility of media that are accused of reporting events superficially. Collaborative effort between established media and community groups has made it possible to develop so-called ‘hyperlocal’ coverage, with a reporter’s core work backed up by additional information supplied online.

2.a The role of user generated content

A key element in the debate about how the Internet and people outside the newsroom are changing the relationship between journalists, their audience and their sources of information is how to harness these new connections to improve the quality of media.

The consistent failure of purely amateur-run publications suggests that quality will always depend on the added value of professional competence and the application of ethical principles.

The ubiquitous camera phone and email inbox provide millions of images and messages through which media trawl every day for added value in their traditional reporting of events. But we are seeing a profound and probably lasting change in relations between journalists and viewers/readers through the development of networked journalism that moves beyond plundering the snapshots and snippy comments of readers.

- *The role of the citizen is still unclear. Questions raised by user generated content are:*
 - *What acts of gathering, preparing and distributing information comes under the umbrella of citizen journalism?*
 - *Who takes responsibility for content?*
 - *How are standards maintained?*

2.b The Two-Edge Sword of Blogging

A legitimate ethical concern about the ‘blogosphere’ is that too much of it is unsubstantiated gossip, speculation and rumour. Media need to be wary of using content that is portrayed as accurate information filtered by a blogger where in fact it turns out to be little more than information from one source, such as a public relations firm or lobby group.

Blogging is the two-edged sword of the information revolution. On the one hand, it sets us free to speak to one another within a universe of democratic exchange outside the reach of political and corporate control. But on the other, it opens the door to mindless trivia, banality, and worse, to some grotesque and hateful ideas and images that, in the name of civilisation and decency, we have hitherto left outside the reach of the law.

- *The legal uncertainties about bloggers raise questions such as:*
 - *Is the blog truthful, is it ethical, and is it honest?*
 - *Is the blog really a substitute for dedicated journalism of quality produced by well-trained reporters and editors working full time?*

- *Do we need new laws – applied through a global legal regime – that will protect privacy, decency, authors' rights and democratic standards and ensure that bloggers and journalists operate on a level playing field?*

The last point is certainly a good idea. The EFJ supports the standard-settings developed in the future by the Council of Europe following this Ministerial Conference in 2009 – but we fear that it would take years to get agreement by governments on such a process.

Meanwhile, self-rule and standards for blogging should be developed at the same time as media education, particularly for young people, to be media savvy as they navigate around some of the toxic content on the Internet.

We note that there are a few Internet news sites that are making their mark and keeping traditional media on their toes. For example the *Huffington Post* in the United States, which has a pool of 2,000 bloggers, was a pioneer of standard-setting on the net, and insisted that pass holders must correct factual errors within 24 hours or lose their privileges and that facts must be checked for accuracy.

2.c Regulating for or against the public?

The EFJ would like to recall the experience of the European Parliament which encouraged an open discussion on the status of blogs in a report adopted on September 2008 on media pluralism in the EU. The report stated that “blogs are an important new contribution to freedom of expression”. However, MEPs rejected the idea of creating a “blogger registry” in which bloggers’ interests would be disclosed and they had to reject the proposal for a “clarification of the legal status of blog authors”. The response from bloggers was hostile. Indeed, the Rapporteur Marianne Mikko (a former journalist) was shocked to be compared to ‘Mao Tse-Tung, Lukashenko, Ceausescu’, and others, a response which revealed the sensitivity of this matter in citizens’ mind.

Nevertheless, we believe that we need to clarify the situation of bloggers and whether they should have the right to protect sources or where liability should be assigned in the event of lawsuits.

Certainly, for example, the issue of defamation and blogging is a complex one. If bloggers post defamatory material, accessed anywhere, they become liable for their actions.

➤ *Main proposals include that:*

- *The Council of Europe and its member states should hold discussions for proposals for more liability of Internet content through voluntary identification;*
- *There needs to be a balance between the desire for an interactive audience, free flow of news and opinions and the risk of publishing unlawful content.*
- *Media have to defend their reputations by introducing careful systems to monitor and regulate comments, similar to that for letters to the editor. Online contributors will have to provide contact details and trained staff will have to check their comments.*

Conclusions

What concerns national unions and associations of journalists is that there is a mixing of “citizen journalism” with professional work which is potentially ruinous to ambitions for all-round improvement in quality of media.

Too many media are using non-professionals to cut costs and undermine the depth of coverage.

Without dedicated, competent and well-trained journalists who earn their livelihood from the profession of journalism it will simply not be possible to provide the richness of coverage and depth of reporting that people need to make sense of the world around them.

Journalists are different from bloggers and others because their work is carried out in the framework of a professional set of values – the need to be truthful, to be independent and to be accountable to the public.

The European Federation of Journalists and its partner the International Federation of Journalists has launched the Ethical Journalism Initiative to revive the spirit of professionalism and mission in journalism.

This is we believe vital in reinforcing the role of quality journalism as a cornerstone of democratic society.

The future of journalism is uncertain, but any future it has will depend on the restoration of values in the work that journalists do. As that happens there will be a significant benefit to democracy which flourishes when there is a public information space in which standards are applied and respected.