

**MEDIA ETHICS: A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE IN THE
SEARCH FOR TRUTH, MEANING AND REALITY**

by

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or past submitted it at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

According to recent research done in the field of media ethics, it seems that there is a need to complement studies on systematic normative ethics with more flexible theories such as those proposed by the field of Philosophy and Sociology.

This assignment would like to prove that a more holistic model of moral reasoning should be considered based on the point of departure that the media and media practitioners find themselves in a postmodern world.

The aim of this assignment is to examine the possibility of a postmodern ethics as a more authentic attempt by which the concept media ethics can be understood and applied.

This assignment is a contribution towards the re-examination of media ethics in terms of a postmodern understanding of reality, truth and meaning, as well as an exploration of their practical implications in the context of a postmodern society such as South Africa and its media.

According to the postmodern understanding of the concepts *truth* and *meaning* in relation to the postmodern understanding of *reality*, the postulated principles will define responsible journalism (media ethics) as journalistic action that takes into account how people (news consumers and sources of news) form their understanding of reality in a postmodern context. What purports to be reality in the news is inevitably a reconstruction of reality that fits the needs and requirements of journalistic practice.

In this light, responsible journalism can be understood as journalistic action that creates a more holistic, authentic understanding of “reality” and how people understand themselves and others in the world they live in. Most people are informed by the media about themes such as the cloning of human beings, the war in Iraq, the attack on the World Trade Centre and genocide in Rwanda and not because of having been there themselves (direct experience). The way in which the media reports about events does influence the way in which media users make sense of the world in which they live.

OPSOMMING

Na aanleiding van onlangse navorsing gedoen in die gebied van media-etiek, blyk daar 'n behoefte te wees om sistematiese normatiewe etiek met meer omvattende teorieë aan te vul, soos voorgestel in die studie rigtings van Filosofie en Sosiologie.

Hierdie werkopdrag wil bewys dat, indien in ag geneem word dat die perswese homself in 'n postmoderne wêreld bevind, 'n meer holistiese model oorweeg kan word vir diskoerse in media-etiek.

Die doel van die werkopdrag is om die moontlikheid van 'n postmoderne etiek te ondersoek as 'n meer outentieke benadering waarvolgens die konsep media-etiek verstaan en aangewend kan word.

Die werkopdrag lewer 'n bydrae ten op sigte van 'n herevaluasie van media-etiek in terme van 'n postmodernistiese lees van *realiteit*, *waarheid* en *betekenis*. Die praktiese implikasies van 'n postmoderne media-etiek in die konteks van 'n postmoderne samelewing, soos dié van Suid-Afrika en die Suid-Afrikaanse media, sal ondersoek word.

Na aanleiding van 'n postmoderne interpretasie van die konsepte *waarheid*, *betekenis* en *realiteit*, stel die werkopdrag 'n raamwerk voor waarbinne verantwoordelike joernalistiek op etiese wyse beoefen word en rekening hou met die postmoderne interpretasie van die samelewing. Dit is onvermydelik dat dít wat as werklikheid in die nuus daargestel word, 'n rekonstruksie van die werklikheid is om aan die behoeftes van joernalistieke praktyke te voldoen.

In die lig van bogenoemde, kan verantwoordelike joernalistiek gedefinieer word as joernalistieke optrede wat 'n meer holistiese, outentieke interpretasie van die werklikheid en begrip van die leefwêreld oordra.

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Introduction

There is a need to rethink the role of the media in South Africa. This became apparent against the background of the history of media/government relations under apartheid and the conflict between the media and the ANC government in 2000/2001. Central to this rethinking should be a re-evaluation of the traditional values associated with the concept of 'freedom of expression' in the changed 'postmodern world (Fourie 2002: 38).

According to Fourie, South Africa is part of the global order and the so-called era of postmodernism characteristic of present day societies, "despite being a developing country with all the needs, problems and challenges facing developing countries" (Fourie 2002: 35).

It is the view of this assignment, that not only the concept of 'freedom of expression' needs some revision (as suggested by Fourie) in the light of the "new society" in which the media is operating, but also (and this is the focus of this assignment) the concept of "media ethics". The media should engage in a process of rethinking the content and validity of values that inform the framework of "media ethics" in light of the role and the impact the media has in a postmodern society.

As a form of cultural text, the media as institution plays an important role in the postmodern subject's social construction of reality (Schmidt & Zurstiege 2000: 173). The meaning systems of everyday life, popular and cultural ideologies that construct values and norms prescribing moral conduct are transported and represented by the media.

The media informs its users about events that happen outside their circles of direct contact/experience. Users are informed about what happens "in the world" through the various forms of media such as newspapers, television, radio and the Internet.

The pluralisation of the way people live their lives and the decentralisation of the modern subject ask for a new way of thinking about values and norms. In modern thought the person is "an object for a universal will, or for general laws of history" (Kvale in Anderson, 1995: 20). The person is overburdened; man has become the

centre of the world and the individual and its thoughts and feelings the cornerstone of modern thought. By studying humans in their cultural and societal context, universal narratives collapse and local narratives come into prominence. Decentralisation means that more emphasis is placed on the local understanding of concepts such as truth, how people interpret the reality they live in and how they construct meaning in the context of their own socio-economic context. The local interaction, the communal network, is the point of departure; universal, transcendental laws are departed from. "Rather than equating universal laws with the objective and the individual with the subjective and relative, valid interpretations of meaning and truth are made by people who share decisions and the consequence of their decisions" (Kvale in Anderson, 1995: 20).

With the collapse of universal systems of meaning or meta-narratives, a "re-narrativization of culture takes place, emphasizing communication and the impact of a message upon the audience" (Kvale in Anderson, 1995: 21). The narratives of the community and the ways in which they are told (by journalists for example), contribute to the upholding of values and the social order of that community.

The South African media still adheres to western news values and is driven by economic interests similar to any other news institution in the developed world. For the South African society and especially media practitioners, a change in the way people view themselves and the new ways in which they make sense of the world they live in (especially after the fall of Apartheid in 1994) offers new challenges to value systems. This assignment proposes that the different lifestyles and different ways in which the "rainbow nation" makes sense of the world it lives in, justifies a postmodern perspective on media ethics to be a more relevant frame of reference for South African media practitioners when speaking and thinking about media ethics.

Subject of inquiry and methodology

The **subject matter** of this paper will focus on the so-called postmodern perspective itself. The postmodern reality, in which media practitioners and media users live and operate, will form the basis of the proposed new ethical values.

This assignment will not attempt to compare current examples of media ethical policies with the newly proposed ethical values that will be suggested in chapter 4, as this would presuppose a whole new inquiry and could be the subject of study for future research. The assignment is much rather an exploration directed towards the question “what kind of person should I be?” than trying to attempt to ask “what are the things I should be doing that would make a good (or ethical) person of me?”.

Firstly the study will start by defining what kind of understanding of reality, truth and meaning is characteristic of a so-called postmodern society. The relevance of these characteristics for the South African society will be highlighted in order to explain why this study chooses to suggest a postmodern perspective on media ethics for the South African media.

Secondly the assignment will proceed by defining the postmodern perspective on ethics after which it will suggest new values derived from the postmodern view on ethics, by which media practitioners could judge responsible journalism.

The postmodern perspective on principles such as *truthfulness*, *responsibility* and *participation* will be explored in order to support the idea that a postmodern ethics should move a way from transcendental principles and embrace values that are more in line with the pluralistic way of life as represented in a postmodern society.

From a **methodological** perspective, this study will approach the role of the media from a normative paradigm; emphasising the *ideal* role of the media and the values it should establish in the South African society. As suggested by Fourie (2002: 19) “the purpose is to provide cognitive maps for thinking about the relationship between the media and society, and to raise professional consciousness”.

The **theoretical approach** can be described as “a hermeneutics of reality” (Gomes in Christians & Traber, 1997: 221). This assignment adopts the view of Gomes when he suggests that “reality, charged with ethics and appealing to justice and liberation” should be the professional motivation behind the moral decisions media practitioners make.

By investigating what kind of reality is portrayed via the form and content of the media, compared to the economical, political and social conditions of the specific society, media practitioners are challenged to adhere to an ethics which is more sensitive to the differences created accordingly.

By exercising a hermeneutics of reality media practitioners would be challenged to ask themselves questions such as “what is the world becoming through our representation of events in news reports and newspapers?” or “what kind of reality are we constructing by the way in which we portray events in certain contexts?”.

The idea of exercising a hermeneutics of reality is also echoed in Baudrillard’s explanation of the relevancy of a postmodern perspective on ethics:

On the postmodern scene ethics can only stand a chance of achieving any form of credibility if it becomes a strategy of radical antagonism, a play upon reality, the issuing of a challenge to the real, an attempt to put the real on the spot.

This means that the simulacrum itself must be confronted. The system of signs must be infiltrated and made to signify ethically. If reality is the effect of the sign and the system of reference is only the result of the power of the sign itself, then the sign itself must be interrupted by ethics (Baudrillard as quoted in JN Hamman, 2000: 62-63).

Following Baudrillard’s suggestions regarding the relevance and focus of ethics in a postmodern society, this study will investigate how reality is represented in newspapers. The sign to which Baudrillard refers, will in this instance be “the news” itself as presented in newspapers, seeing that news can be identified as a network of signs. News (and therefore newspapers) as cultural sign and signifying

framework furthermore present a symbolic (or mediated) reality. The nature of reality and its relation to the signs will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Structure of Study

The five chapters of the assignment are arranged as follows:

1. The first chapter is concerned with the definition of the term *postmodern* and the attempt to clarify misunderstandings about conceptions of it as being equal to *relativism*. The chapter also explains why a discussion on postmodernism is applicable to the South African context. The postmodern position is explained from an understanding of the world as being overwhelmingly pluralistic in the way it confronts difference and diversity.
2. The second chapter is concerned with the definition of the terms truth, meaning and reality as seen from the Gadamerian hermeneutical point of view as postmodern theory. A postmodern understanding of media ethics should be informed by the postmodern understanding of the concepts *truth* and *meaning* and how their reconceptualisation influences the understanding of *reality* and specifically of reality as created by the media.
3. The third chapter is concerned with the definition of postmodern ethics. Postmodern theory presupposes an understanding of reality as being less easily described in terms of modern theories of epistemology. It has shaken the pillars of *reason* and *ultimate truth*. This understanding brings about necessary changes in the way we think about morality and ethics. The study of ethics (and especially media ethics) cannot develop untouched by these changes. The chapter explores the consequences these changes have on the postmodern understanding of ethics and how it relates to the concept of *ubuntu* as ethical foundation in African philosophy.
4. The fourth chapter proposes three principles by which responsible journalism could be judged according to the postmodern understanding of the concepts *truth*, *meaning*, *reality* and *ethics*.

The three principles proposed are explored from the basis of respect for human life and suggest a new way of thinking regarding “being in the world”. The principles do not focus on answering the question “what shall I do?” Instead they challenge the media practitioner to ask him or herself “what kind of reality am I creating?”

5. Chapter five is the concluding chapter and a discussion of the inter-relatedness of the different terms brings the understanding of media ethics and its purpose in the media’s role in society into perspective. Recommendations for further research in the area of media ethics as well as the limitations of the study are discussed.

Chapter 1

DEFINING THE TERM “POSTMODERN”

An American anthropologist visited Japan during the Christmas season and noticed that the retail merchants there had begun to take a great interest in the symbolism of Christmas. When he wandered into a large department store in Tokyo, he saw a striking example of this: a Christmas display that prominently featured Santa Claus nailed to a cross (Anderson 1995: 1).

In an attempt to define postmodernity, Anderson uses the example of “Santa Claus on the cross” to illustrate the “state of mind” of contemporary society’s understanding of itself and the reality in which it is functioning. It seems as if societies all over the world are in the middle of a confusing, stressful and promising process of historical transition. The transition has not so much to do with a change in *what* we believe, than rather with a change in *how* we believe.

Anderson’s example illustrates it is not so impermissible to tinker with the “hallowed symbolic heritage of societies – mixing rituals and traditions like greens in a salad, inventing new personal identities, revising old political ideologies, picking and choosing what to believe and what not to believe” (Anderson 1995: 2). The postmodern understanding of a concept like religion for example, accepts that it is equally possible to move from seeing a religion as a timeless truth to seeing it as a product of a certain culture and still worship happily at a your church or temple.

These shifts in belief about belief are very characteristic of postmodern thought. The modern era is characterised as a time of “battles between religions, between religion and science, between political ideologies. And although each of these had its own inventory of essential truths, none has been able to gain universal agreement that those truths were all that true” (Anderson 1995: 5).

This is especially applicable to the contemporary South African society that can be seen as a melting pot of diverse cultures, beliefs, languages and social classes.

This shift in belief about belief is mostly characterised by a strong sense of disillusionment (or unmasking the illusions as referred to by Bauman later) in the principles and theories of modernity.

The way in which the terms “modern” and “postmodern” will be used in this study must be clarified in order to move beyond the often contended and controversial objections held against postmodernism.

In the scope of this study the term “postmodern” refers to the style of thinking that accepts the fact that we can no longer provide a single description of “the world” and its domination by a common morality known to all rational beings.

When discussing postmodernity from a socio-philosophical point of view, the disbelief and disillusionment as such is not based on a chronological understanding of the prefix “post”. Here the definition of Anderson (1995:6) refers to the term as “a world that does not know how to define itself by what it is, but only by what it has just ceased to be”.

On a cultural level, the postmodern society is characterised by a “new type of cultural experience” (Morley in Curran & Walkerdine 1996: 53). By trying to answer the question of “What is the experience of postmodernism? How does it feel? What is the structure of feeling in this period?”, Morley quotes Ignatieff who claims that the “experienced” can be characterised as “a 3-minute culture – the culture of the short attention span, where politicians no longer address us in speeches, but in 30-second sound bites and through photo opportunities; a world in which the news comes in 90-second bits, each disconnected from the last, in a plethora of little stories and images” (Morley in Curran & Walkerdine 1996: 61).

From this description of the postmodern “cultural experience”, Ignatieff defines a media where narrative is replaced by flow, connection is replaced by disconnection and sequence is replaced by randomness. The postmodern culture acknowledges the fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain quality of how individuals experience the world in which they live. These feelings are also projected in the cultural texts the postmodern subject produces. According to Barker (2000: 22) texts are “typified by

self-consciousness, bricolage and intertextuality” which produces “the blurring of cultural boundaries”.

As defined above, the postmodern cultural experience is clearly seen in the South African society especially in the way in which newspapers, magazines and broadcasters communicate events and themes.

Critique against the postmodern perspective

The different responses to postmodernism are based on different understandings of the concept’s meaning.

The two most common arguments against postmodern or related perspectives are that it is **relative** and **irrational**. In defending the objection against relativism, Cilliers (2003) explains a relativist in the following terms:

“The rejection of a universal and ahistoric form of rationality would only imply relativism to someone that is committed to the modern dream to the extent that the absence of absolute points of reference would render the whole world meaningless”.

In effect this means that a relativist (someone operating from the belief system that “anything goes” and the conviction that truth is relative) is in a way nothing else than a disillusioned fundamentalist. Cilliers poses that it is possible to deny the existence of absolute points of reference, without being labelled a relativist.

“From a structuralist and post-structuralist perspective, meaning, whether conceived linguistically or socially, is generated through relationships of difference in a complex network of interaction” (Cilliers, 1998: 37- 47). Understood in the light of complexity theory, meaning is neither arbitrary nor per definition unstable (as most critics object).

In the second place, a postmodern perspective does not imply a total dismissal of rationality. In fact it rather supports the view that there are limitations to an abstract,

instrumental kind of rationality that is insensitive to the complexities of certain conditional situations.

Morley (in Curran et al., 1996:51) supports this point of view when he refers to the postmodern perspective as a sense of disillusionment with modernity's rational organisation of everyday social life. He elaborates on this theme by suggesting that using the term "disillusionment" might be too strong and that "it might be better to talk of the growing awareness of the limits of various kinds".

Once again Cilliers (2003) argues from the perspective of complexity theory and suggests a more Aristotelian view of rationality that incorporates a wider spectrum of human capabilities rather than pure logic:

The complexity of the world we live in cannot be described fully in terms of a closed set of rules. If the notion 'rational' should refer only to a set of coherent, logical principles that are universally valid, the postmodern position would dismiss it.

Aristotle's definition of man as rational being is deeply inscribed in the social ethos of specific communities and the virtues it produces. One of Aristotle's insights namely, that moral wisdom comes with experience, is here connected to Cilliers' explanation of complexity theory. Experience cannot be prescribed or predicted by some form of logical measurement or calculation.

Postulating an objective transcendental truth (as found in Kant's categorical imperative) is no longer seen as beneficent for a civilization emerging from the security of its tribes, traditions, religions and worldviews. A postmodern position celebrates an understanding of the world which is overwhelmingly pluralistic in the way it confronts difference and diversity.

"In a postmodern society the development of technology, in particular the electronic media, opens up an increased exposure to a multiplicity of perspectives, undermining any belief in one objective reality" (Kvale, in Anderson 1995: 19).

News media and entertainment is a medium through which the diversity of the world we live in is portrayed. Media content certainly influences our understanding of the

social world, seeing that it communicates underlying messages about the nature of reality. Media contents furthermore provide models of norms, values and behaviours.

Seen from a media ethical point of view, news values should not be based on transcendental universal laws that are inflexible and exclusive. Instead it should focus on constructing news contents in such a way that it portrays the different frames of references and worldviews from which the members of its society are operating. Furthermore media practitioners should strive toward moral principles that are based on values and norms that embrace difference and diversity in order to be relevant in a postmodern society.

The next chapter explores which values and norms are worth striving for when considering implementing ethics in a postmodern society.

Chapter 2

MODERN AND POSTMODERN ETHICS – AN EXPLANATION OF THE UNDERLYING THEORY

“Ethics? As far as I am concerned that’s that place to the east of London where people wear white socks” (Kelvin MacKenzie, former editor of *The Sun*, quoted in Sanders 2003: 14)

Introduction

The study of ethics searches for an answer to the question “what shall we do?” and should enable the moral agent to learn how to judge situations in order to establish what sort of behaviour would be morally correct and acceptable. According to Leschke (2001: 7-11) ethics refer to the moral principles that control and influence a person’s behaviour. These principles are formulated in systems of moral decision-making or rules of behaviour as found in a code of ethics.

A discussion of the differences between modern and postmodern ethical theories would therefore focus on the different definitions given to terms such as “moral behaviour”, the “norms and values” which presuppose morality and the consequences thereof.

The probable truth is that moral choices are indeed choices, and dilemmas are indeed dilemmas – not the temporary and rectifiable effects of human weakness, ignorance and blunders. Issues have no predetermined solutions nor have the crossroads intrinsically preferable directions.

Human reality is messy and ambiguous – and so moral decision, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent (Bauman, 1993: 13).

With this description of reality, Bauman tries to convey the essence of what he calls the “postmodern perspective” on morality. When seen in the light of ethical rationalism as the prevailing paradigm in modern thought, Bauman also refers to the

“postmodern perspective” as nothing more than “modernity¹ without illusions” (1993:3).

By recognising certain pretences as false and certain objectives as neither attainable nor desirable, a postmodern perspective on morality and ethics wishes to offer new ways of understanding morality. The postmodern perspective directs the subject away from the self-critical and almost fundamentalist views of the moral theories based on instrumental rationalism and ultimate truths.

Christians (1997:4) agrees with Bauman’s view that there is a need for a new perspective on making moral decisions and conditions for judging human behaviour:

Determined to remove all external authority except human reason, the Enlightenment celebrated advances in science and politics founded on rational consent. But now, the curtain is coming down on 300 years of Enlightenment modernity. The foundations on which universal norms were built have eroded. The very concept of norms has been destroyed; the Western world has lost its feeling for them.

It might seem that the modernist project to establish reason and the notion of transcendental truth as unshakeable and unchangeable foundations on which to build a civilised society might need some rethinking. This idea is closely connected to Bauman’s idea of “unmasking modernity”.

An awakening to the fact that human reality is “messy and ambiguous” and that the pillars of reason and ultimate truth have been shaken, brings about necessary

¹ Modernity refers here to a historical periodisation, also known as the “Neuzeit”, a term which appeared in Germany in the 1820’s. “Much of the debate about modernity hinges on the fate of the concept of (...) the Enlightenment” (Morley, in Curran 1996: 51). The principles of the Enlightenment suggested confidence in human reason when explaining the natural world and its history in opposition to the superstitions and myths proposed by religion. Reason and transcendental universal truths were implemented to explain nature and to direct human behaviour.

changes in the way we think about morality and ethics. The study of ethics (and especially media ethics) cannot develop untouched by these changes.

Choosing between modern and postmodern ethics

The Post-Modern age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity. This is partly a consequence of what is called the information explosion, the advent of organised knowledge, world communication and cybernetics (Charles Jencks in Anderson, 1995: 27).

Our understanding of ethics will be influenced by the style of thinking we choose. Ethicists choosing the modernist point of view would support theories that suggest universal ethical principles and norms that would apply always to everybody. Such an example can be found in the Kantian theory of the categorical imperative that idealises virtue in light of a transcendental truth.

The failure of a modernist rationality is measured against the fact that the principles that provide the criteria for proper ethical behaviour are limited when applied to practical circumstances. This limitation is not due to a lack of moral integrity, but because the framework within which they thought was not concerned with contextualised instances, but with the general and abstract. The outcome of modern ethics implies that rules, laws and codes prescribing moral behaviour are regarded as universal sets of principles or rules.

The agent acting under their guidelines has no choice in the matter and the proper functioning of institutions and society is dependent upon a universal acceptance of the rules and codes of conduct. This would position the locus of moral decision making outside the individual. The universal empirical status of the principles prescribing the rules or codes of behaviour is transforming them into some sort of mechanism (instrument) directing human behaviour. One could even go so far as to say that the way in which the modernist position does not require from the agent to

make any decision, seeing that the status of the rules and codes of behaviour carries the responsibility of the individual's actions which is actually a way of circumventing ethical responsibility. The consequences of a decision can be blamed totally on the prescribed system of rules and regulations.

As mentioned earlier, a postmodern position celebrates an understanding of an overwhelmingly pluralistic world. It acknowledges difference and diversity as well as the complexity of the phenomena it deals with.

There is a movement away from the idea of a "found" or prescribed morality based on a single cultural heritage or religious belief system. Morality is instead formed or agreed upon out of dialogue and choice. Values and norms are seen as locally made, rather than "found" in prescriptions by universal principles.

The way in which morality also forms the kind of ethics a society agree upon (as social construction of the society's norms and values), is clearly demonstrated in the way Luhmann defines the influence norms and values have on the formation of morality and eventually also ethics.

In his reflection on communication ethics, Luhmann's System theory suggests that ethics can only observe the way in which morals are revered or disrespected. Based on this observational function of ethics as seen from Luhmann's point of view, ethics cannot be the basis from which morals should be established as traditionally accepted. Luhmann expresses his mistrust in the traditional point of view when he defines ethics as a construction of morality: "Die Ethik kann die Moral nicht begründen, sie findet sie vor, und sie hat es dann mit der Problematik dieses Befundes zu tun"² (Debatin 2003: 85).

If the postmodern position were to argue that this means that all rules and regulations should be ignored and are not necessary, it would fall into the trap of relativism and irrationality. This understanding would be an oversimplification of the complexities and often contradictory nature of reality. The crux of the matter lies in accepting the ambiguity in which the postmodern agent finds himself. Only when

² Translated as: *Morality cannot be grounded in ethics, seeing that morality presupposes ethics and it has to do with the problem of this recognition.*

one can accept the fact that there is no ultimate good or virtuous action that would “sanctify” the consequences of any moral decision, and also understand that without some kind of moral guideline or code of behaviour society would not be able to function, we move closer to an understanding of postmodern ethics.

A postmodern perspective on ethics reacts exactly against this blind following of rules. Cilliers (2003) expands on this by adding “there can be no question of ethics without involving moral responsibility. The moral agent has to accept the responsibility for his decisions, a responsibility that cannot be shifted onto those enforcing (*or prescribing*) the law (*or conduct of behaviour*)”.

From this point of view it is clear that the moral agent cannot avoid *choice*. It also implies that ethical behaviour involves an acknowledgement that generalisation is not possible when taking into account the complexities and pluralistic ways in which social environments are organised. Often it is the conditions of the complexity of the social system that challenges individuals and institutions with contradictory demands.

When the nature of complex systems³ is taken into consideration, the ethicist should consider a position that presupposes more than only *responding* to a specific situation. The postmodern perspective suggests that there should be reasons for acting in a certain way and furthermore that those conditions should be of such a nature that they would convince others to act similarly under similar conditions, without propagating a *general* position (exactly that which is argued against).

A postmodern ethics expects from the moral agent not to choose between either a transcendental position or a pragmatic one. Rather, it requires from the agent to *enter into this ambiguity* and in a way, to accept both sides of it.

Cilliers (2003) sums the challenge of the postmodern position up in the following terms:

³³ “In a complex system the interaction among components of the system, and the interaction between the system and its environment, are of such nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analysing its components. The brain, natural language and social systems are complex” (Cilliers 1998: ix).

The position acknowledges that we cannot give complete descriptions of complex situations in terms of a finite set of rules. At the same time we cannot cope without rules. We need them in order to make sense of the world and to operate in it. This may sound like contradictory demands, but that would only be the case if the rules have to be universal and timeless, and that is not how they are conceived of. They should be drawn up as if they were universally valid, but with the proviso that they have to be re-evaluated each time they are applied.

This implies that the moral agent cannot escape making a choice each time he considers making a moral decision. The moral agent can also not escape accepting responsibility for the consequences of the decision. The *as if* further allows the moral agent to keep some notion of ethics that is both ideal *and* practical. This notion is employed as being transcendental, but does not allow the transcendental emptiness to prevent us from acting and accepting the responsibility for the actions ourselves. According to Cilliers (2003) this view is often referred to as being quasi-transcendental.

Bauman even goes further and suggests that the paradox as seen in the postmodern perspective “restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that that modern self-confidence once promised.... Moral responsibility comes with the loneliness of moral choice” (Bauman 1992: xxii).

To conclude this discussion on the influence a postmodern perspective has on ethics and especially media ethics, the following suggestions from Cilliers (1998: 139) as to how to make responsible judgement is worth mentioning:

- Respecting otherness and difference as values in themselves.
- Gathering as much information on the issue as possible, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to gather all the information.
- Considering as many of the possible consequences of the judgement, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to consider all the consequences.

- Making sure that it is possible to revise the judgement as soon as it becomes clear that it has flaws, whether it be under specific circumstances or in general.

To come back to Anderson's definition of postmodernity as mentioned earlier, the transition from rational modern ethics to postmodern ethics has not so much to do with a change in *what* we believe, than rather with a change in *how* we believe.

Consequently the following chapter will look at the possibility of forming new values by which media practitioners should define moral action in the light of the postmodern understanding of reality, truth and ethics.

Chapter 3

DEFINING THE POSTMODERN UNDERSTANDING OF REALITY, TRUTH AND MEANING

Introduction

The gadamerian definition of the term hermeneutics proposes that “understanding is realised through the activity of interpretation” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 166). Principal among Gadamer’s claims is that interpretation does not proceed, as with the Enlightenment model, on the basis of free and rational criteria, but “based on factors such as language, norms and traditions in and through which subjectivity finds itself constituted” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 166). According to Gadamer, the intersubjective conditions that form a tradition provide the standpoint from which interpretation precedes. “This is because interpretation, in his view, is an engagement which takes the form of a reciprocal relationship between reader and text” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 167).

A hermeneutics of reality is an attempt to formulate a general theory of human understanding. At the core of philosophical hermeneutics lies its rejection of the modernist idea of *method*. Hermeneutics seeks to “reconceptualise the traditional philosophical concepts of meaning and truth. The way in which it had done so makes of hermeneutics a distinctively postmodern philosophy” (Madison, 2001: 186).

In opposition to modern epistemology, hermeneutics does not try to prescribe a specific method that one should follow if what one says is to be allowed to count as “true”. Instead, hermeneutics seeks to *describe*, in other words, to “achieve a reflective awareness of, what actually does occur whenever people attain to an understanding of things that they consider to be both meaningful and true” (Madison 2001: 186).

In order to arrive at a postmodern understanding of ethics, it is important to understand what the postmodern understanding of the concepts *truth* and *meaning* constitutes and how this reconceptualisation influences the understanding of *reality*.

This chapter will look at the postmodern definitions of the concepts *truth*, *meaning* and *reality* and more specifically at how our understanding of these concepts is also shaped by the technically enhanced capabilities of the media.

Truth

“Truth is made rather than found” (Richard Rorty quoted in Anderson 1995: 8).

The postmodern approach to epistemology rejects the idea of truth as a fixed eternal object. Knowledge is a question not of true discovery but of the construction of interpretations about the world, which are taken to be true. According to Barker (2000: 21) postmodern writers such as Foucault, Rorty and Derrida all reject the idea of grand narratives and stories that can give us a certain knowledge of the direction, meaning and moral path of societies. Postmodernism supports the idea that knowledge and truth are not metaphysical, transcendental or universal but specific to particular times and spaces. The postmodern perspective understands that knowledge and truth are specific to language-games, embraces local, plural and diverse knowledges.

Hence the view that knowledge is perspectival in character and multiple viewpoints or truths are required to interpret a complex, heterogeneous existence. In his discussion on the validity of a postmodern understanding of truth, Madison argues that “the crucial test for any interpretation is the degree to which it actually enables us to get a better purchase for our experience, come to a better understanding of it – of the world, other people, our selves – and, likewise, the degree to which it enables us to get a better handle on our practices” (Madison, 2001: 77). In other words, an interpretation will be held to be true if it serves to illuminate “our experience and helps us to cope in the world” (Madison, 2001: 77). The lived, shared human experience (life world) is the “universal measure (*metron, kriterion*) of what is true” (Madison, 2001: 77).

The postmodern understanding of truth would require from media practitioners operating in South Africa, to look beyond their own moral boundaries and understanding of certain events in order to present the truth in a more pluralistic manner.

At this point an inquiry into the understanding of epistemology according to African philosophy will illustrate what is meant by the embracement of a more local and pluralistic perspective and how it coincides with the postmodern understanding of truth.

Integrating the underlying concepts of the African *Ubuntu*-Philosophy as basis for a postmodern perspective on ethics

On the basis of the definition of ethics as both focussing upon human behaviour and explanation for what is understood as moral conduct, as well as focussing upon the specific principles underlying particular moral behaviour, the ethics of *ubuntu* rests upon strong philosophical foundation. *Ubuntu* may be seen as the basis for African philosophy.

Defining *ubuntu*

Ubuntu is the normative ethical category that prescribes and, therefore should permeate the relationship between *untu*, *kuntu*, *huntu* and *kuntu*.⁴

Ubuntu refers to the idea of be-ing in general. It refers to the unfoldment of the person in the specific forms and modes of being. *Umuntu* is the specific entity, which continues to conduct an inquiry into being, experience, knowledge and truth. "This is an activity rather than an act. It is an ongoing process impossible to stop unless motion itself is stopped. (...) *Ubuntu* is always a –ness and not an –ism" (Ramose in Coetzee et al., 2002: 231).

⁴ Different forms of describing ways of being (see Kagamé, 1955: 99-119)

The ethical principle underlying *ubuntu*, is the notion that “to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish human relations with them” (Ramose in Coetzee *et al* 2002: 231).

This can also be understood by the notion that being human is not enough – one has to prove oneself to be the embodiment of *ubuntu*, according to Ramose. The command to become a human being by moving from *umuntu* (one single person) to *ubuntu* (plural) leads the individual to be recognised as a human worth of existing. Human worth and all ethical, social and legal judgement of human conduct are based on the principle of *ubuntu*.

The African idea is the idea of community – people depend on other people in order to be seen worthy as human beings. The freedom and ‘rights’ of the individual are not considered so important as in modernist Western modes of thought. This concept clearly has implications for media practitioners who are communicating to a society where *ubuntu* philosophy shape and form the way in which they understand their world, what they believe to be true and how they make sense of reality, such as is prevalent in contemporary South Africa.

Communication as Truth: the African perspective

A dominant feature of philosophy, which until recently meant Western or European philosophy, is its theory of rationality. Rationality has been seen as a universal inherent ability of humankind to determine **the** truth (Teffo & Roux in Coetzee *et al.*, 2002: 162).

According to the claims of traditional Western theories of philosophy, African people were explicitly denied the status of rational beings (Outlaw in Coetzee *et al.*, 2002: 141). The concept of “rationality” is based upon logical deduction and strict rules of evidence that exclude all outcomes based on tendencies of affect.

True to the postmodern perspective, Higgs suggests the following understanding of rationality:

...reason emerges in plural conversations, in which people together inquire, disagree, explain, or argue their views in the pursuit of a consensual outcome. Such an outcome is one that the participants, after careful deliberation of different opinions and alternative perspectives, are satisfied with for that moment in time (Teffo & Roux quoted in Coetzee et al., 2002: 162).

This understanding of rational reasoning suggests that truth is arrived upon in a very specific setting and takes the context of the individuals into consideration. According to African Philosophy (see discussion on *ubuntu*-philosophy later), the idea of truth must be viewed from the standpoint of rheomodic thought⁵. Ramose explains that “according to rheomodic thought, truth may be defined as the contemporaneous convergence of perception and action. Human beings are not made by the truth. They are makers of the truth” (in Ramose in Coetzee et al., 2002: 235). In other words it can also be understood that truth is lived. This view opposes the idea of living in and by the truth.

It is very interesting to note that the *ubuntu*-philosophy’s understanding of truth corresponds with the postmodern theory regarding truth. Barker confirms this correlation when he quotes Rorty and Foucault in suggesting that “we abandon epistemology, recognising ‘truth’ as some kind of social commendation; a condition which Foucault describes as ‘being-in-the-true’” (Barker 2000: 148).

To summarise: postmodern philosophy argues that “truth” refers not to a monological metaphysical state of affairs (mirroring relation between ideas and reality), but to a “dialogical mode of human co-existence” (Madison, 2001:188) based on an intersubjective understanding of “truth”.

In other words, truth is arrived upon by seeking common agreements (“truth”) by means of discourse of a communicatively rational sort rather than by means of force.

⁵ “The rheomode is derived from the Greek verb ‘rheo’ meaning flow. It is a new mode of language trying to find out whether it is possible to create a new structure that is not prone toward fragmentation as is the present one. It is a critique of thought and language structure which assumes and imposes a strict divide and necessary sequence in terms of subject-verb- object” (Ramose in Coetzee *et al* 2002: 23).

Journalistic Truth

“One of the main problems with ethical codes and their deification of the truth, is that they never get around to saying just what truth is. Another problem, perhaps as frustrating, is that ethical codes fail to recognise that there is often a tension – even a contradiction – between providing the truth and being ethical” (Merrill 1997: 107).

In trying to answer the question “what is truth”, Merrill suggests that journalists should consider what he calls levels of truth (Merrill 1997: 113). According to Merrill, five different levels of truth can be defined in the scope of journalistic enquiry (i.e. the “orthodox” way of understanding truth in terms of media ethics):

Level 1: Transcendental truth

This is the all-encompassing truth, complete, overshadowing truth; truth in its totality. The journalist cannot ascend to this level; it cannot be found or communicated.

Level 2: Potential truth

This truth is composed of the aspects of Transcendental truth that can possibly be grasped by human perception, research and rationality. The journalist can, if diligent and persistent enough, obtain potential truth for inclusion in a story. This level can never completely be reached by the journalist, but serves as an ideal or goal.

Level 3: Selected truth

This truth is abstracted or selected from the total reality of the story by the journalist. It is the portion of truth that the journalist has managed to perceive. It forms the raw material for the story.

Level 4: Reported truth

This truth is the part of the selected truth that the journalist actually reports. It is only a part of the accumulated data and is undoubtedly the most important part of the truth in that it is the part that represents the event in reality. It is the part of the truth that the journalist can control.

Level 5: Audience-perceived-truth

This is the lowest level of the truth where the journalist has no control over the information he or she has revealed. It is up to the audience member which part of the truth is perceived.

Merrill (1997: 116) calls the journalist's will or determination to reach the highest level of truth, the foundation for ethical reporting. He further uses Mahatma Gandhi's teachings on ethics to suggest that "truthfulness" is a much better way of striving towards ethical behaviour. "For Gandhi, truthfulness basically means a devotion to facts and eagerness to discover the truth of any matter" (Merrill, 1997: 116). This notion will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4 when exploring truthfulness as a moral principle according to the postmodern understanding of ethics.

Meaning

Because truth is an intersubjective matter, understanding [meaning] itself is always, in one way or another, a matter of communication (Madison, 2001: 187).

Madison argues, "hermeneutics is as fully postmodern as deconstruction" (2001: 25). In discussing Gadamerian hermeneutics, Madison supports Gadamer's notion that "human understanding can never transcend its limitations so as to arrive at some atemporal Archimedian point" (2001: 27). Seen from a hermeneutical point of view, understanding (and meaning) is always culturally and historically situated and rooted in tradition. This explanation coincides with Saussure's definition of meaning when he says that meaning is produced through a process of selection and combination of signs along two axes, the syntagmatic (linear – e.g. a sentence) and paradigmatic (a field of signs – e.g. synonyms), organised into a "signifying system" (Barker, 2000: 17). Signs do not possess meaning inherently, but generate meaning by making reference to each other. From this point of view meaning is a "social convention organised through relations between signs" (Barker, 2000: 17)

Coinciding with the above-mentioned definition of meaning are the ideas of Jacques Derrida and his critique against the 'logocentrism' of Western philosophy. Logocentrism is explained as "the reliance on fixed *a priori* transcendental meanings" (Barker, 2000: 73). In other words, Derrida suggests that meaning cannot exist within human reason before any other kind of thinking occurs. According to Derrida, "language is always a system of differential signs which generate meaning through difference rather than by correspondence with fixed transcendental meanings or referents to the real" (Barker, 2000: 73).

For Derrida, we cannot think about truth, knowledge, reality and culture without signs. Meaning is the outcome of relationships between texts, and all meaning contains traces of other meanings from other places. This is referred to as "intertextuality", that is, citation of one text within another.

Postmodern culture is marked by intertextuality. Stylistically this can be seen in the mixing of genres and styles from different periods, locations and contexts. "Representations of the past and the present are displayed together in a bricolage which juxtaposes previously unconnected signs to produce new codes of meaning" (Barker, 2000: 73).

Consequently how a reader will interpret a text (such as a newspaper article or photo) will depend on the recognition of the relationship of the given text to other texts. Thus, for example, a photograph of a politician in a newspaper may yield more meaning (or further levels of meaning) if it is interpreted not simply as a representation of its subject, but rather "through a frame constituted by other photographs of the same person (possibly in widely different situations), speeches made by him or her and even cartoons lampooning the politician" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 197).

The following cartoon is an example of how a reader will interpret a text in terms of his or her recognition of the relationship of the given text to other texts. More layers of meaning can be interpreted in these cartoons than just what it is representative of.



Figure 1

Figure 1. Source: The *Sunday Times*. July 6, 2003

The cartoon depicts US president George Bush's recent visit to Africa. Seen from his (and thus the American / Western) point of view, he is the "bringer of good tidings and salvation" to Africa. He is depicted as Jesus Christ in the thought box (halo, long hair and clothes and making the sign of the blessing with his left hand). In the mind of Africans he is seen as Darth Vader, a figure in George Lucas' cult movie *Star Wars*. Darth Vader represents the "Dark Force" and wants to take over the world by his evil powers.

Readers who are not familiar with the Star Wars sub-culture might find it hard to understand the cartoon.

Intertextuality may be understood as the assignment that no text exists outside its continuing interpretation and reinterpretation. Seen from Gadamer's hermeneutical point of view, understanding is realised through the activity of interpretation based on factors such as "language norms, traditions in and through which subjectivity finds itself constituted" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 166). Here (as seen by the postmodern definition of truth) meaning is constituted intersubjectively and provides the standpoint from which interpretation precedes, although it does not determine it completely. "This is because interpretation is an engagement which takes the form

of a reciprocal relationship between reader and text” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999: 166) Hence a text has the ability to transform one’s preconceptions. Through the activity of interpretation (discovering the meaning of a text), one has the opportunity to engage (also called *participation* as will be discussed later) with the Other, which is able to re-structure the interpreter’s preconceptions and thereby the basis of their understanding.

Journalism & Hermeneutics

“Der Journalist ist Hermeneut unserer Massen- und Medienkultur”
(Boventer quoted in Lescke 2001: 162).

According to Boventer communication, and especially mass communication, can be defined as action aiming at producing understanding. Conveying and interpreting meaning (hermeneutics) is according to Boventer inherently the ethical dimension in the context of media ethics (Boventer, in Lescke 2001: 163)

In the light of Boventer’s understanding of communication and meaning, journalism can be understood as being an “terrain par excellence” when investigating the application and relevance of ethics. Journalism is “communicative and it requires freedom in order to portray reality, which is at the same time a condition of its ethical discourse” (Boventer, in Lescke 2001: 164).

Boventer even goes as far as to summarise his very complicated theory of media ethics, based on the gadamerian understanding of hermeneutics in what he calls a “hermeneutischen Glaubensbekenntnis des Journalismus” (translated: Journalism’s hermeneutical confession of faith):

“Journalism is capable of having its own hermeneutical relationship, in the same way as language, with reality. Whoever understands wins freedom in knowing him self and others. A journalism which understands is a free and human journalism”⁶
(Boventer, in Lescke 2001: 164).

⁶ “Der Journalismus kann, wie die Sprache, zur Wirklichkeit ein enges und hermeneutisches Verhältnis haben. Wer versteht, gewinnt Freiheit in der Erkenntnis über sich selbst und die anderen. Ein verstehender Journalismus ist ein freier und menschlicher Journalismus.”

The consequences this understanding of meaning and interpretation has, is of ethical concern for media practitioners, seeing that traditional codes of conduct suggest that journalists should aim to be impartial and objective. An investigation into the nature of reality and the essence of postmodern ethics will show that through the hermeneutical process one becomes aware of this intersubjectivity. This awareness will lead us to the proposed principles (or hermeneutical values – cf. Madison) of truthfulness, responsibility and participation. Without adopting these norms as basis for moral behaviour, the idea of intersubjectivity could lead one to understand that biased and distorted representations of reality are justified.

The growing emphasis in mass communication theory on meaning construction and human agency is one of the main shifts in the field of current communication theories. A movement away from an interest in cognition towards an interest in culture. The most recent expression of the perceived need to study culture and cultural expression in mass communication theory (which includes theories in media sociology) is cultural studies that tries to explain communication and media in contemporary society (Hardt, 1992:217).

In the critical study of social issues in media analysis, however, cultural studies occupies the central position (Anderson, 1991:x). Given its dominant position in the cultural sphere of urban, industrialised societies, the mass media constitutes a major field of critical cultural analysis. Three approaches within the field of cultural studies are given by Jansen (1996):

Classical cultural studies focuses mainly on modes of production in the consciousness industries and on patterns of ownership and systems of distribution.

Hermeneutical cultural studies assume an active audience and view economic determination as a process of defining constraints and exercising pressure. This view describes cultural practices as a function of the ideological construction of power relations. Texts are seen as ideological instruments in the process of producing, transforming and shaping of structures of meaning.

Discursive cultural studies focus on the inter-textual domain of experience in which the subject is positioned and articulated. This approach looks for the ways in which texts produce meaning by structuring signifiers around the subject and how in texts other networks of texts are inserted and how the interaction reinforce meaning.

Critical cultural studies is deliberately anti-disciplinary and has been influenced by a variety of texts, including that of structural linguistics as presented by Claude Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes, feminist theory and the poststructuralist developments in and from the work of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault Kristeva, etc. (Hardt, 1989: 586).

Cultural studies examine reality as a set of relations, as social constructions multiply mediated through language, the media, sense perception and the hidden dimensions of consciousness. These processes are argued to intersect with, and arise out of, the relations of production.

Social Semiotics

Within the framework of cultural studies, semiotics are applied to such diverse artefacts as literary texts, popular songs, photographs, newspaper reports, television programmes, clothing and food. It differs from traditional literary criticism and aesthetics, for “it does not seek to assess the **worth** of texts, but rather to understand the process through which the text become **meaningful** and how they are variously **interpreted**” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999:351).

The study of semiotics “provides the human and social sciences with concepts and instruments used in the description and analysis of the various ways in which people assign and convey meaning” (Fourie, 1996:3).

Fourie also suggests that “by studying the media as a text, we can learn a great deal about a society’s religions, education, culture, economy, prevailing norms, attitudes and patterns of behaviour in that society”. This understanding of the media is important, seeing that it is generally accepted that the influence the media have on our perception of reality is chiefly a symbolic one (Fourie, 1996:158).

The study will now look at the ways in which the hermeneutical understanding of truth and meaning influence the way we look at reality and specifically at reality as created by the media.

Reality

Postmodern thought is characterised by a loss of belief in an objective world and a departure from the belief in one “true reality”. Postmodern theory focuses on the social and linguistic construction of reality as seen or made when observed from different perceptions.

Steinar Kvale (in Anderson, 1995: 19) describes the influence of the media on the construction of reality as follows:

In society the development of technology, in particular the electronic media, opens up an increased exposure to a multiplicity of perspectives, undermining any belief in one objective reality. In a world of media, the contrast between reality and fantasy breaks down and is replaced by a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs.

Seen from this perspective, reality is socially constructed and a subjective social world is established where language determines the person’s understanding thereof. This leads to the understanding that the most fundamental aspect of social situations is communication, and not as sociologists generally accept, behaviour of individuals (Luhmann quoted in Van den Bulck, 1999: 10).

A communication theory of the social construction of reality proposes that people can learn about reality by direct, unmediated experience (for example by touching a live wire, one learns that one can get shocked). In most other cases objective reality will be represented through some kind of sign-system where people learn about reality through contact with a symbolic reality (such as news conveyed via television or newspapers). Van den Bulck proposes that “it does not seem to matter much who or what is carrying that symbolic reality; a message distributed by television is not necessarily less believable than a message received from a friend” (Van den Bulck 1999: 10).

The importance of language as transporter of meaning and the opinion that ideas cannot be understood apart from the language systems that produce them (Anderson 1995: 8) are central in the postmodern understanding of reality.

When taken into consideration that communication is understood as a system of social codes, such as language, photo's, art, etc. (Fourie 1996:3-5), people are constantly engaged in interacting with reality by means of such social codes.

According to Fourie (1996: 78) the study of communication semiotics proposes that "communication and media can be conceived as a specific signifying practice, (...) which indicates the recognition of media as a system or series of systems of meaning". In other words the media has become an articulation of an aspect of reality. From this point of view media is seen as a work of semiosis, producing effects of meaning and perception.

In criticising the media as symbolic form, the postmodern theories of Jean Baudrillard are very pessimistic about man's loss of reality. For Baudrillard, mass communication leads to the disappearance of authentic communication and the emergence of meaningless signs (Fourie 1996: 171). Signs in the media exist for themselves. The media effectively becomes a sign without any real link with truth or reality. Baudrillard refers to this simulation of reality as a simulacrum:

Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference (Baudrillard in Anderson 1995: 81).

Baudrillard makes a distinction between a simulation of reality as opposed to a representation of reality. For him, representation is based on the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent, whereas simulation presupposes the radical negation of the sign as value. It masks the fact that there is no basic reality and bears no relation to any reality. It is its own pure simulacrum.

Morey interprets the phenomena of the simulacrum as "life announcing it as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved

away into a representation... reality becomes a spectacle... the spectacle becomes real... and the spectacle is the image of the capitalist production" (Morely in Cunran et al 1996: 63).

The following pictures are examples of what Baudrillard calls a *simulacrum* according to which the presentation is based on the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent.



Figure 2. Source: *Die Burger*. July 23, 2003

Figure 3.

Source: *The Citizen*. July 23, 2003



Figure 4.

Source: *The Star*. July 23, 2003



Figures 2, 3 and 4 were all published on July 23, 2003 on three different papers' front pages. Because of the simultaneity and immediacy of the photos, it moves beyond just reporting on road accidents and high-jackings and actually transforms the events into a confirmation of a certain kind of reality. The reality is not that these events took place, but that South African roads are dangerous and that death comes unexpectedly and unpredictable.

On explaining the cultural logics of postmodernism, Denzin takes Baudrillard's simulacrum as point of departure to explore the effect that the media has on an individual's cultural understanding of reality. The simulation of reality by the media "introduces a new set of media logics and media formats. The new formats alter the

person's relationship to the 'real' and the technologies of the real" (Denzin 1992:79). Consequently the individual is turned into a new "cultural object", which produces cultural knowledge and cultural texts via the new "informational formats".

Denzin's view on the media is that it transforms everyday life (our interpretation of reality) into a theatre of spectacle: "into sites where the dramas that surround the decisive performances of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age are staged. These dramas are staged against the backdrop of compelling, newsworthy events which are shaped by uncertainty, unpredictability, and natural disaster" (Denzin 1992:79). These stories form and reaffirm the cherished values of communities and the way they think about ethical behaviour.

Seen from the paradigm of a communication theory, communication constructs reality. From this point of view, media ethics should be concerned with how media practitioners construct (or mediate) reality.

Chapter 4

DEFINING RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM IN TERMS OF VALUES BASED ON POSTMODERN ETHICS

Introduction

According to Wiegerling (1998: 1), media ethics cannot be defined as some kind of new ethical theory presupposing new norms and values, but rather as a specification of ethical inquiry. In the first instance, media ethics is a descriptive form of ethics. It describes the behaviour of people under mediated circumstances. Media ethics should not be answering the question “what should we do?” but rather “what should we be observing (be wary of) when acting under mediated circumstances?”

In other words, media ethics focuses on the behaviour of systems conveying information in mediated form.

Seen from the postmodern point of view, media ethics is not so much based on normative principles as it is focussed towards an attitude of responsibility (Wiegerling, 1998: 1). Furthermore it is important to note that according to Cilliers’ explanation of ethics as previously mentioned, a postmodern perspective does not suggest an “everything goes” attitude. Instead it acknowledges that society cannot function without codes and laws prescribing conduct, but the most important difference is the *status* of the codes of conducts and laws governing behaviour. From the postmodern perspective, ethics does not provide a blue-print with an outline of “right behaviour”, but it becomes a way of life – a way of being, instead of looking at some external source by which moral behaviour can be deduced.

Hence the following proposal for three attitudes media practitioners could adopt in order to measure their actions.

Respect for humanity as foundation

The only legitimate option is an ethics that is culturally inclusive rather than biased toward Western hegemony. Normativity should be understood in terms of our human wholeness in order to have an

ontological ground for an ethics viable in contemporary context (Christians, 1997: 6).

Christians is very careful not to put a new understanding of communication ethics under any kind of condition. He suggests that instead of building the foundation of ethics on a universal epistemology, it might be more reflective when focussing on some kind of ontological universality. He bases his “Ethics of Being” on the following understanding of the communicative being as described by Henrici:

For communication to occur beyond more mere transmission, the human being must be able to recognise the otherness of its representations that which is intelligible to itself, that is, what is universal in them. (...) A communicative subject must actually know universals, not in the sense of abstract generalisations, but with the capacity to grasp precisely the universality imminent in the particular. The communicative mind must be able to assimilate that universality of something other, without thereby losing self-identity, that is to say, without itself becoming something universal (Christians, 1997: 6).

Based on the above understanding of the communicative subject (which also refers to media practitioners), the ethics of communication (journalistic practice and media production) should be based on the protonorm of basic respect for human life.

This understanding of human beings and the communicative processes in which human beings engage precedes the formation of ethical principles. This view coincides with Cilliers’ practical suggestions (as mentioned earlier) for considering a postmodern view on ethics, namely respect for otherness and difference as values in themselves.

Included in the concept “basic respect for human life”, is the understanding of freedom as a universal, cross-cultural value, which recognises that people everywhere have a right to their own opinions and a right to determine what is right for them. Seen from the point of view as offered by hermeneutical theory, the basis of freedom as protonorm “requires from us that we exist properly as humans, in

accordance with the dynamics of communicative rationality, engaging in what Karl Jaspers referred to as 'boundless communication'. To the degree that we do so, to the degree, that is that we seek mutual understanding with those from other cultures by means of dialogue" (Madison, 2001: 89).

A communication ethics based on the ontological protonorm "universal respect for human life and freedom of speech", calls for "ethical principles based on moral commitments which are inscribed in our worldview through which we share a view of reality and establish human community"(Christians, 1997:12). Christians' description of communication ethics coincides strongly with the idea of *ubuntu* as discussed earlier, stating that the condition for being a moral human being is based on acknowledging the Other and assimilating the humanness of the Other.

When speaking about respect for all human life and freedom as a universal protonorm as basis for an understanding of ethics, the term "universal" should not be understood in the Kantian or even Habermasian sense. The principles that emerge from the protonorm are called universal not just because they are true cross-culturally, but because "the universality of these values is beyond culture" (Christians, 1997: 314). The values are rooted ontologically in the nature of human beings. It is by virtue of what it means to be human that these values are universal.

In light of the above understanding of the communicative subject and ethics, this assignment would like to propose three ethical principles that would support the idea that a postmodern ethics should move away from transcendental principles and embrace values that are more in line with the pluralistic way of life as represented in a postmodern society and its view of reality as described in this assignment.

Applied to the practice of media ethics, the understanding of the protonorm (respect for human life and freedom) implies that media ethics should adopt values that promote mutual understanding amongst people of different cultures, which is especially relevant in South Africa.

These principles will not focus on answering the question “what shall I do?” (should I publish the photo or not?) but rather challenge the media practitioner to ask him or herself “what kind of reality am I creating (when I publish or not publish a photo)?”

Does the picture or article reflect the reality of the Other in the context of his or her social milieu, or does the picture or article and the image of the world it forms, alienate the reader more from the Other?

The three suggested **principles** are now being discussed in light of the above that serves as the foundation from which the principles flow.

Truthfulness

Truth is understood as authenticity in a social context, rather than as a strict script correspondence to a static reality. This implies a search for fundamental values cutting across cultures and throughout the ecosystem (Rønning & Kasoma, 2002: 63).

As discussed earlier in the assignment, it is clear that a postmodern perspective on truth defines the nature of truth as “made rather than found”. The concept of “truthfulness” refers to the “recognition of the obligatory nature of truth in our own practices” (Mieth, 1997: 88).

In terms of moral responsibility “truthfulness” can be interpreted as a “commitment to the truth on the part of the individual, to the truth between individuals and to the truth in relation to reality” (Mieth, 1997: 88). This definition also corresponds with the definition of “truthfulness” as understood in African philosophy. Wiredu explains the concept of “truthfulness” according to the Akan way of thought as the “relation between what one thinks and what one says” (Wiredu, 2002: 239).

Wiredu interprets this concept by noting that what other people think is not important and has no particular role to play. One should conceive of truthfulness as saying unto others what one would say unto oneself. “To say that someone is

speaking truthfully is to say that the person genuinely believes what he/she is saying to be true" (Wiredu, 2002: 240).

Seen from this point of view truth is neither "objective" (existing in itself) nor "subjective" (arbitrary). It is *intersubjective* in that it is a true opinion that is generally agreed upon by a community, which shares the same understanding of reality. From this it follows that it is in the very nature of truth to be ever changing (or evolving).

Rønning and Kasoma (2002: 80) name three criteria for "making the truth" in a truthful way by suggesting that (1) facts should be based on evidence, (2) stories should promote understanding and (3) that reporting should be fair and balanced.

These criteria are connected to Christians' protonorm of basic respect for human life. Mieth (1997: 102) goes so far as to say that "in the context of reality (...) love presupposed truth. Love is not truthful if it is instrumental, that is, merely makes use of another person. True love accords full recognition to the person, and his or her story, the past, the present and the future".

In light of the above discussion, the principle of truthfulness would imply that reporters and editors write and publish what they believe to be true in relation to individuals (or events that took place) and in relation to reality. The principle of truthfulness should be seen as inseparable from the foundation of respect for human life. Once one has adopted truthfulness as an attitude (a way of life – as being in this world) it becomes the basis from which mutual understanding for "otherness" and difference in life forms can be approached.

In the spirit of truthfulness facts are not considered as ammunition to be used in order to marginalize and scandalise the Other. Instead they are turned into tools by which we can enter into the space where one's own truth can be seen in the context of the Other's understanding of truth. This new understanding of truthfulness as ethical principle is especially of value in the multi-cultural post-apartheid society of South Africa where facts should not be isolated and presented out of context and thus supporting existing stereotypes. The attitude to present facts in a truthful way

might be seen as a way to avoid translating reality into stereotypes and or representing stereotypical stories and explanations. What one does with the truth (how it is presented) might be of greater ethical importance than seeing it in terms of a strict correspondence of facts with a static reality.

The following picture is an example of what truthfulness should not be understood as being.

Once one has adopted truthfulness as an attitude (a way of life – as being in this world) it becomes the basis from which mutual understanding for “otherness” and difference in life forms can be approached.



Figure 5. Source: The Cape Argus. July 25, 2003.

The pictures of the dead sons of Saddam Hussein where published by American media to prove a point, namely that they killed “no. 2 and 3” on their “most wanted-list” for terrorists. By making these pictures public, they wanted to send a message to other members of the Iraqi resistance army and to scare them with the consequences of what would happen to them, should they fall into the hands of the American soldiers. Although there is no dispute regarding the horrific deeds of gross

violation of human rights Uday and Qusay where involved in, the American authorities did not consider how the Iraqi people might feel when the picture was published. On some level by publishing these photos, they did not “enter into the truth of the Other”. The Other being here “normal” and suffering Iraqi people who are still trying to make sense of their world after the terrible trauma they have lived through as a result of the war.

In a relating article on p. 4 of the same paper, it was said “many people were voicing anger that the display of the Hussein brothers was a shocking lack of consideration of Arab culture”.

This understanding of truthfulness and the way in which facts (or truth) are constructing reality brings the discussion to the next principle.

Responsibility

The human condition has in postmodern times undergone a radical, qualitative transformation. As Paul Ricoeur has said: “For the first time in the history of humanity, the latter is capable of actions whose dangerous effects are of a cosmic dimension. The relation of our action with the inhabitable world is immediately a source of ethical questioning” (as quoted by Madison, 2001: 252). Due to the technically enhanced capabilities of human action, even the unintended effects of human intervention pose the ethical problem directly in terms of responsibility.

Hence the understanding that a postmodern ethics is necessarily an ethics of responsibility. This view coincides with Wiegerling’s suggestion that media ethics is not so much based on normative principles as it is focussed towards an attitude of responsibility (see discussion earlier).

In terms of a hermeneutics of reality, the concept of responsibility in media ethics refers to the responsibility upon the journalist or editor to create an authentic representation of reality. When the postmodern ideals of pluralism and localisation are kept in mind, the journalist and/or editor has a responsibility toward the media users in his or her specific society in terms of how reality is being presented.

From this point of view ethical responsibility is a “local responsibility” which Lyotard calls his Theory of Paradox, as derived from his Theory of Pluralism (Wiegerling 1998: 144). Lyotard’s Theory of Paradox suggests that from a postmodern view, we are only left with a responsibility towards that which is local and that Aristotle’s idea of *phronesis*, which suggests that we evaluate each situation with practical wisdom and situational cleverness or insight. This view coincides with Cilliers’ suggestions (see discussion earlier) on postmodern ethics:

- Considering as many of the possible consequences of the judgement, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible to consider all the consequences.
- Making sure that it is possible to revise the judgement as soon as it becomes clear that it has flaws, whether it be under specific circumstances or in general.

The idea of *phronesis* furthermore also connects with what has been said about the status of codes of conduct (the fact that they are external forces directing the moral agents’ behaviour) and the moral agent’s responsibility to make choices. To quote Bauman again: “the paradox as seen in the postmodern perspective restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that that modern self-confidence once promised.... Moral responsibility comes with the loneliness of moral choice” (Bauman 1992: xxii).

For media practitioners this further implies that one has to make a conscious choice about what kind of reality one’s work will be presenting. In his book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987), Peter Sloterdijk focuses on the responsibility journalists have “whose job it is to produce pictures and information about reality” (1987: 307).

His criticism towards journalists and editors is based on the lack of responsibility being displayed in how reality is being represented by the press. He speaks of a twofold “disinhibition” that concerns the production of pictures and information in modern mass media: “the disinhibition of the portrayal vis-à-vis what is portrayed, as well as of the disinhibition of the currents of information in relation to the consciousnesses that absorb them” (1987: 307).

The first disinhibition is based on the journalistic exploitation of others' catastrophes and the press' hunger for misadventure, which has become as Sloterdijk calls it, the "moral vitamin of society" (1987: 307). The use value of news is measured in large by its stimulation value, which is amplified in the way it is packaged (layout, placement of articles, photos and advertisements). Sloterdijk claims that journalists are not acting responsibly when packaging information in a sensationalising style. "[B]y acting as if every day could have its sensation and as if a form of consciousness had not long since arisen in our heads, precisely through its reporting, that has learned to accept scandal as a way of life and catastrophe as background noise" (1987: 308).

In describing the second disinhibition, Sloterdijk criticises the media's "power of compilation" and its ability to cause "distraction and deconcentration" in the consciousness of the observer (1987: 312 & 308). He furthermore criticises the fact that we now regard it as normal that when opening a magazine or newspaper, an enormous simultaneity stretches itself out in our informed consciousness: "reports on mass starvation in the Third World next to advertisements for champagne (...) here some are eating; there some are dying. Here some are being tortured: there, famous lovers separate. Here, the second car is being discussed: there, a nationwide, catastrophic drought. (...) Here, Siamese twins are successfully separated: there, a train with 2000 passengers derails into a river. Such is life. As news, everything is at our disposal." (1987: 309) This idea of Sloterdijk connects with the postmodern idea of and fragmentation as mentioned earlier.

What are foreground, background, important, unimportant, trend, and episode? All are ordered into a uniform line in which "uniformity (*Gleichförmigkeit*) also produces equivalence (*Gleichwertigkeit*) and indifference (*Gleichgültigkeit*)" (1987: 309).

The front page of this paper (Fig.6) is an example of Sloterdijk's "second disinhibition" where he criticises the media's "power of compilation" and its ability to cause "distraction and deconcentration" in the consciousness of the observer.

SLAAN 'N 6-KAART!

LEX'S VANDAG

Styrië is weer 'n Wilde
Die belangrikste nuus van die week is die nuus dat die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush 'n besoek aan die Amerikaanse staat Texas sal maak. Die Amerikaanse president sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

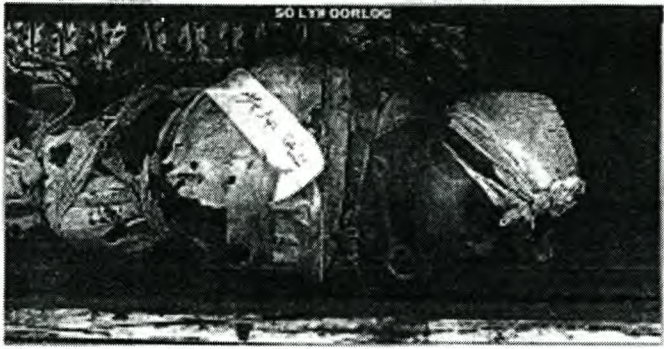
Wie's jou pa?
Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Waarheen is hy in SA?
Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Is jy 'n reëlgevoel?
Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Bank blootstel om... StellenCell
Tel: 021 887 8888

MOTORBURGER
Aan die 121. 121. 121.



Die blywende 'n reëlgevoel' van 'n Amerikaanse president sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Bendes skiet nog 'n kind
Meer as 150 dertig slaggere in oëe

Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Dor die rooi lyn: Vrees vir gasaanvalle

Bagdad-slag begin

Met beslissende fase is 'n dank op die Saddam-regime se hart geerig

Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

US wil nie seks in koshuise reguleer, sê Brink

Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

NUUT UIT D'IE VSA

THERMWOOD HOEFFIE

Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

TAYLOR

Die Amerikaanse president George W. Bush sal op 11 April 2003 na Dallas reis om deel te neem aan die Amerikaanse Mid-Week Festival.

Source: Die Burger. April 3, 2003.

The shocking picture of a dead baby who was killed innocently during an American bomb attack in Baghdad, is placed next to a mobile phone advertisement amongst other articles relating to gang related violence on the Cape Flats and sex in Fraternity houses on the Stellenbosch university campus. What amplifies the idea of indifference and equivalence even more, is the advertisement of "Taylor Blinds" at

the bottom of the page. The blinds are captured by the logo: "New from the USA". The reader of the paper has just seen what the effects of the American attack were in Baghdad (destruction and death in the name of democracy) and in the same breath, the paper indorses very expensive wooden blinds as a desirable American product.

Placing such an advertisement on the same page somehow distorts the reality regarding the death of the child. In terms of the principle of responsibility, this kind of editing would not pass as responsible media practice.

Sloterdijk criticises media practitioners for adopting the "And-mentality" as the morality of journalists: "The media kitchen serves us daily a reality stew with innumerable ingredients, but it still tastes the same every day" (Sloterdijk, 1987: 313). In this indifference of the "And" vis-à-vis the things it juxtaposes lies the concern for media ethics and its need for responsible choices.

In light of the above discussion, an ethics of responsibility would suggest a journalism that chooses to represent reality in a more nuanced way by being thoughtful of how it packages reality so that the effects of equivalence ("*Gleichwertigkeit*") and indifference ("*Gleichgültigkeit*") are minimised.

The following discussion on the principle of "participation" should be seen from the understanding that an ethics of responsibility expects the moral agent to make choices.

Participation

In order to make ethical choices based on the principle of truthfulness, the moral agent cannot be a passive observer of his or her world. Seen from a media ethical point of view, this implies that the media practitioner cannot be presenting reality from a passive and so-called objective point of view.

The discussion on the principle of participation will be based on Priscilla Cornell's work called "The Philosophy of the Limit" (1992) in which she integrates insights of Derrida, Adorno, Lacan and Levinas to suggest an ethics of the 'beyond', of

openness to unimagined possibilities as a call for a radical transformation of the present.

The ethical message of the principle of participation

“The need to let suffering speak is the condition of all truth”
(Theodor Adorno, in Cornell, 1992: 13)

Cornell quotes Adorno as point of departure for her discussion on the ethical dimensions of pity. She chooses to use the term “ethical relation” when referring to “the right way to behave”:

The ethical relation, a term which I contrast with morality, focuses instead on the kind of person one must become in order to develop a nonviolative relationship with the Other. The concern of the ethical relation, in other words, is a way of being in the world that spans divergent value systems and allows us to criticise the repressive aspects of competing moral systems. (Cornell, 1992: 13)

The ethical relation critiques the kind of person we are called to become if we are to do our moral duty in terms of the Kantian interpretation of the categorical imperative.

In order to support her understanding of the ethical relation, Cornell uses Adorno’s idea that “without the recovery of a playful innocence achieved with the Other in oneself, one cannot become a human being capable of non-violative relations to the Other” (1992: 14). This understanding of the Other calls us to “be” differently in our relationship toward the Other.

This “being” toward the Other is then described in Adorno’s *Reinterpretation of the Ethics of Pity* formulated by Schopenhauer and translated into what we know as compassion:

“[T]o grasp this truth is to be humiliated. But the wound to our narcissism opens us to the only “true” foundation of morality – compassion for the suffering of others” (Cornell, 1992: 14). By putting ourselves in the “shoes” of the Other, we learn to identify with the Other. “We come to see the true significance of our petty striving, its ultimate insignificance. What lingers after the denial of the will, is both the composure of one who knows and the pity of one who experiences the suffering of others as a shared human fate” (Cornell, 1992: 14). It follows then that such a recognition in all beings, his true and innermost self, must also regard the endless sufferings of all these lives as his own and taken upon himself as his own. No suffering is any longer strange or foreign to him.

Here Schopenhauer offers us an ethic of pity (caring / compassion) based on the identification of the truth of the human condition. His is the wisdom of disillusionment. The loss of innocence is the price we pay for the knowledge that can open us to the only true human freedom.

Cornell concludes her complicated discussion on ethics by suggesting that the ethical relation’s message is a gentle, directive message that does not demand the universalisation of one particular behavioural mode of morality. The focus is less on doing what is right in accordance with one’s duty than on the development of an attitude of tenderness toward otherness and gentleness toward oneself as mediator of communication.

Cornell’s interpretation of the ethical relation coincides with the understanding of the self and the other in *ubuntu*-philosophy as discussed earlier. The ethical principle underlying *ubuntu*, is the notion that “to be a human be-ing is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish human relations with them” (Ramose in Coetzee et al., 2002: 231).

Both Cornell’s suggestion of the ethical relation and the philosophy of *ubuntu* are based on the protonorm of basic respect for human life as discussed earlier. The principles of truthfulness and responsibility are enforced by the principle of participation. Once media practitioners see the Other (the person they are interviewing, the catastrophe and misadventure of the Other) as part of him- or

herself and sees his or her existence in relation to the Other, it may lead one to want to adopt the principles of truthfulness and responsibility. Dishonesty and disregard for responsibility toward the Other would imply being disconnected from the self and a denial of respect for oneself.

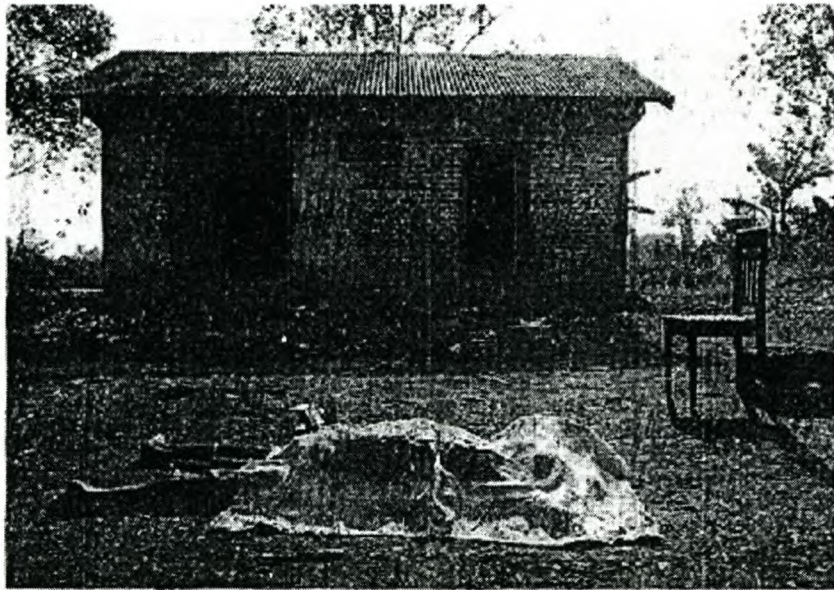
In relation to the idea of responsibility Cornell highlights that seen from an irrationalist point of view, ethical responsibility is reduced to “a choice amongst other choices individuals make (Cornell, 1992: 100). She however argues against this view and maintains that ethical responsibility is not a choice at all, but an “irremissible necessity, since we are inevitably in the proximity of the Other” (Cornell 1992: 100).

In light of the above discussion, the ethical relation presupposes that the media practitioner is actively participating in the way that he or she chooses to represent reality. Respect for him- or her self translates to respect for basic human life and for the way that the Other sees his or her world. By entering the world of the Other, one is encouraged to produce truthful and responsible representations of reality that strives to communicate equal human rights, stereotype reduction and respect for difference.

The placement of the following picture (see figure 7) is also an example of what the principle of participation should not be understood as being.

Participation suggests respect for basic human life and for the way that the Other sees his or her world. By entering the world of the Other, one is encouraged to produce truthful and responsible representations of reality that strives to communicate equal human rights, stereotype reduction and respect for difference. This picture of a “hacked” body depicts the brutality of the war in Bunia, Congo, but it does not put it in the context of what is exactly happening in Congo and what the causes are of the war. Most readers in South Africa would not even know where the town of Bunya is and would therefore not be able to place the picture and the role that the geographical location of Bunya has in the war. The picture could have been taken in any of the war-torn countries in Africa and does not help to bring more understanding on the situation in the Congo.

The way the picture is placed alongside with the information of the article, this picture encourages the idea that “Africa is a dangerous place full of uncivilised people lusting after war with no understanding of civilised co-existence”. In terms of the principle of participation, this kind of journalism would not pass as responsible media practice.



A PICTURE taken on July 21y shows the body of a young man lying on the central market avenue of Alenzi, some 40km north of Binda where on June 20 lendu militias launched an attack killing and mauling at least 22 civilians.

Picture by AFP

Figure 7. Source: The Citizen. July 23, 2003

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

If we want to contend that freedom of speech is uncompromisable, as mentioned by Fourie (2002: 38), we should keep in mind that more freedom implies a greater need for responsibility. One can only speak of and justify freedom of speech once one has considered freedom, how to value life and what part respect for others play in promoting such a basic human right. Furthermore freedom presupposes understanding and tolerance of difference and diversity.

The aim of this assignment was to examine the possibility of a postmodern ethics as a more authentic attempt by which the concept media ethics could be understood in the light of the complex nature of the reality in which the media and media practitioners are operating.

According to the postmodern understanding of the concepts *truth* and *meaning* in relation to the postmodern understanding of *reality*, ethical principles were defined by which responsible journalism could be judged as actions that take the effect on how people in a postmodern society form their understanding of reality into consideration.

Central to this rethinking of the values that underlie ethical journalism, is the understanding that a postmodern ethics does not support relativism and irrationalism by saying that “anything goes”. Postmodern ethics furthermore does not disregard the need for codes of ethics, but it challenges the status of these codes by ascribing more responsibility to the moral agent and not to the code itself. It is stressed that an ethical choice cannot be other than a free one, otherwise one cannot be held responsible for one’s actions. While we cannot escape the responsibility of drawing up principles and codes of ethics, the justness of these codes has to be re-established each time a appeal to the codes are made in a specific context.

Codes of ethics and the principles on which they are based should be seen as a provisional tool that can be revisable and flexible in different contexts. The intersubjectivity of the truth, meaning and understanding of reality that accompanies every new situation should be the starting point on which moral principles should be founded.

According to the principles of moral conduct as proposed in this assignment, responsible journalism is reflected in the way in which reality is being portrayed. The principle of truthfulness would imply that media practitioners write and publish what they believe to be true in relation to individuals and in relation to reality. The principle of participation is made clear in both Cornell's suggestion of the ethical relation and the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Both these are based on the protonorm of basic respect for human life. The principles of truthfulness and responsibility are enforced by the principle of participation once the media practitioner sees the Other as part of him- or herself in relation to the Other.

Against such a background, the media's role in society could be expected as one of helping people to understand how to integrate the world they live in from a larger perspective. This is especially important for media practitioners in South Africa where both pre-modern, traditional and more Western orientated societies exist next to each other. It becomes the responsibility of media practitioners to know themselves, their own truth and the truth of others in such a way that they present "the world as we could come to know it" in a more holistic way.

Limitations of theory and analysis

Much of what has been written in this assignment could be controversial. Seeing that it has been discussed from a normative point of view, the findings could be seen as being idealistic, provisional and debatable.

Although the postmodern perspective and methodology of hermeneutics could be criticised for relativising the notion for a transcendental truth and definition of meaning, it does not rule out genuine critique and mutual understanding between horizons of cultures.

The validity of the findings could also be questioned seeing that the assignment does not provide a detailed situation analysis or case study in order to implement the principles. Neither does it compare how these principles differ from a code of ethics that is grounded on a so-called Kantian perspective. Perhaps one could say that the meta-ethical perspective the assignment provides also reflects the postmodern way of inquiry. Instead of pretending to reach final answers, this assignment should be seen as a starting point for further inquiry.

Further research & Recommendations

This study could be seen as providing a certain theoretical orientation from which the more practical implementation thereof could be investigated further. A closer pragmatic analysis of the identified principles could be undertaken in order to pinpoint more specific guidelines within the South African context of media and journalism studies.

It is strongly suggested that a further study, which compares current South African newspapers' codes of ethics with the postmodern ethical principles as suggested in this assignment, would put the ideas of this assignment in a more practical perspective.

By undertaking a more in-depth exploration into the *ubuntu*-philosophy, one would also be able to relate the ideas of a postmodern media ethics more closely with the South African context. It would also be very interesting to see what *ubuntu*-philosophy has to say about the South African media and the way in which journalists consider the principles thereof when doing their work and reporting about local and international events.

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