

Bulletin LII: SPECIAL EDITION, "TO WHOM DO JOURNALISTS SERVE", MARIJANA BULJAN

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"A journalist serves the public interest", states the first brief, but resolute sentence of the Code of Montenegrin Journalists. This is followed by 12 principles and guidelines elaborating how a journalist serving the public interest should behave. Although there is no brief answer to the question what the public interest is, in the shortest it could be defined as what is in the interest or of benefit to the greatest number of people in a society. And, no matter how indisputable, self-explanatory and agreeable to every journalist that first sentence seems, most of them fail the ethics exam precisely because of that statement.

Some confuse what interests the public with what is in the interest to the public, or, in other words, beneficial for the society. The right of the public to know cannot be used as a lame excuse for peeking into other people's beds. Unverified information and videos which are uploaded online anonymously cannot be published in the name of protecting public morality. Concern for children should not be demonstrated by permanently stigmatizing them as victims of sexual abuse, or survivors of suicide attempt. Broadcasting a CCTV video of a murder, of which all the circumstances are known and indisputable, does not contribute to anything other than the additional suffering to the bereaved family. It could satisfy the curiosity of the public, but pandering to people's baser instincts has nothing in common with the public interest.

Some in the Montenegrin media, (precisely, many) do not make a distinction between the public interest and the interest of current or potential advertisers. It is not in the public interest to literally transmit propaganda of banks on outstanding credit card offers, affordable loans, another successful business year, or a new office and ATM that works 24/7. Instead, media should publish an expert analysis and comparison of services offered by banks. In that way, the public could make an informed decision whether to take a cash loan or a credit card, for example, or find out which mobile operator has the best offer. Although a good tourist season can contribute to the public welfare (in theory, higher income should fill the state budget, from which, in theory, the citizens should benefit), serving the public interest does not mean advertising individual hotels and restaurants in the middle of the news program or without a disclaimer declaring it is a paid advertisement.

Numerous are, however, the examples of unethical behaviour of media that are not so easy to list, as they are not in what was published but in what was omitted from the media. The list of ignored topics, problems, people and organizations would be impressive. It would, also, reveal that very often those media that may seem to be

exemplary in terms of ethics, or even sinless, when statistical data on the number of observed errors is released, grossly violate the basic thesis that they must serve the public interest.

The media, in order to serve the only ethically acceptable master - the public interest, has to address all major issues in society, devoid of sensationalism, and to provide the space for comments and opinions that are not affected by the government or business. Public broadcasters were established with that intention, to serve the whole community, not just political and economic elites. But, other news media, should aspire to this ideal as well.

Numerous democracy and media theories explain importance of media that serves only the public interest in a society with an elected government. All these theories refer to the obligation of the media to inform the citizens as accurately and unbiasedly as possible. This means that they have to address all significant issues, and they must publish not only the facts, but also the positions and opinions of all the relevant representatives in the society. Media merely reporting on what was said or stated, without bringing the context, providing feedback or response, and without verifying everything that can be verified does not serve the public interest.

The question remains – who can make the media act in such a manner? The only answer is self-regulation, although it can seem to be an unattainable and imposed goal. But the Ethical Code, as a set of rules for desirable professional behaviour, is truly effective only if the journalists care about their professional dignity, establish strong professional associations and become aware that their reputation in a society and trust of the public primarily depend on their ethics and integrity. No one but them can make that happen.

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