



Empathy in Crime News Reporting

Sharon Wilson, Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Creative Industries, Room KB 923, 9th Floor, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Sg Long, Bandar Sg Long, Cheras, 43000 Kajang, Selangor Darul Ehsan.- **Malaysia**

Abstract

The study of ethics in news reporting has long been an integral part of journalism. As much as there is a great need to understand the proper sense of responsibility to the public on the part of the newspaper writer, ethics is a requirement for human life. The challenge for modern journalism and especially crime reporters is to find a way to negotiate the often competing professional and ethical considerations involved in finding and representing news, while adhering to a perception of journalism as playing an important role in society. Using qualitative research methodologies, basing the discussion on a textual analysis of two prominent case studies and in-depth interview with crime reporters from three local dailies, the findings revealed that emotions or feelings interpreted as sympathy and empathy was a prominent factor which influences crime reporters in their decision making. It is interesting to find out to what extent crime news reporters exercise journalistic professionalism when it is revealed that emotions and feeling play an integral part in their reporting of crime news stories. The paper concludes that while certain ethical philosophy deny the use and impact of emotion in making clear and valid decisions, emotions and feelings help to subdue aggressive writing and decisions.

Keywords: Crime reporting, Decision making, ethical perspectives, empathy

Introduction

The last two decades have also witnessed a redefinition of that can be considered an appropriate subject for news reporting. Changes in mores relating to public discussion of sex and violence have allowed respectable media outlets to report crimes that would have been previously seen as taboo and to do so at a level of detail that would once have been seen as lurid. At the same time, the politicization of crimes such as sexual assault has broadened the range of crime stories that, it can be argued, legitimately require coverage (Stacco 1995 : 145). Chibnall (1977: x) meanwhile mentions that crime news may serve as a focus for the articulation of shared morality and communal sentiments. A chance not simply to speak to the community but to

speak for the community, against all that the criminal outsider represents, to delineate the shape of the threat, to advocate a response, to eulogize on conformity, to establish norms and values and to warn of the consequences of deviance. In short, crime news provides a chance for a newspaper to approve moral conscience of its readership.

The study of ethics in crime news reporting has long been an integral part of journalism. Ethics and crime news has been a sensitive and touchy subject with a fine thin line separating what can be reported on and what should be reported on and how decisions are made and how this decisions can affect the greater good. In general ethical reporting is based on the journalists themselves on how they



make the decision to report the news, the choice on what to reveal and what not to. As much as there is a great need to understand the proper sense of responsibility to the public on the part of the newspaper writer, ethics is a requirement for human life. It is an individual's means of deciding a course of action. Without it, our actions would be random and aimless. There would be no way to work towards a goal because there would be no way to pick between a limitless number of goals. Even with an ethical standard, we may be unable to pursue our goals with the possibility of success. To the degree which a rational ethical standard is taken, we are able to correctly organize our goals and actions to accomplish our most important values. Any flaw in our ethics will reduce our ability to be successful in our endeavours (Landauer and Rowlands, 2001).

The reality of journalism in the 21st century is that ethical journalism is setting a standard by digging deeper, including necessary context and providing a variety of sources without undue regard to any particular set of special interests, including the journalist's own. Yet, it is always dependent on how individuals perceive it as it actually is and how journalists are able to balance their own personal values and beliefs with those of the editorial and the readers. The challenge of modern journalism is to find a way to negotiate the often competing professional, commercial and ethical considerations involving finding and presenting news, while adhering to a perception of journalism as playing an important role in society. It is a complex business - trying to please the editor, the employer, one's own self and the audience.

In general, ethics deals with the foundations of decision making, of choosing between the good and bad options on the basis of moral principles. Journalism ethics addresses problems concerning behaviour of reporters, editors, photographers and any professionals involved in the production and distribution of news. At the root of this normative, philosophical study is the understanding that the profession fulfils a necessary function of society (Cohen & Elliot, 1997 in Yew & Xiaoming, 2002) but at the same time it also develops, explores and somewhat tests the hidden values, beliefs and the personal input of the journalist in the news gathering and news reporting aspects of everyday journalism.

Empathy as Part of Emotion

Crime news has always been associated with sensationalism and the forefront of blood and gore. The details of a case are sometimes said to over-exaggerate situations to the point of ensuring the story has all the juicy details to sell newspapers and the consideration for the victims, victims' families and suspects are lost. Nevertheless, the issue of empathy seems to be a question that arises in this research as whether the crime reporters consider the need to be sensitive towards the victim and suspect and if they consider what might happen if they are not? Does a lack of empathy explain some undesirable conduct and how does this affect decision making? But to answer this, it is only right to understand what exactly empathy is? According to the Poynter Institute (2009) scholars have emphasized on the importance of empathy and its role in holding societies together. Empathy is often cited as essential to effective interactions in personal, political and professional life. "The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal



frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition. Thus it means to sense the hurt or the pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if I were hurt or pleased and so forth. If this 'as if' quality is lost, then the state is one of identification" (Rogers, 1959 pp. 210-211).

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in order to discuss the existence of ethics in crime reporting. In this research, the casuistry method (in relation to the uses of cases in moral inquiry development) using case study, textual analysis and an in-depth interview was carried out. This textual analysis was used as a supporting factor during the interview. This is somewhat similar to Faridah and Mus Chairil (2000 :132) and Boeyink's (1995) studies where case studies that have occurred in the newsroom were used to understand the usage of ethics in these newspapers. By using the interview technique, the researcher was able to look into the research question and objective, which look into the aspect of empathetic application to sound decision making by crime reporters in the news room while maintaining a balanced journalistic practice (Wimmer, Roger D., & Dominick, Joseph R., 2003). The researcher would also identify if the crime reporters adheres to a certain or similar pattern in decision making

Being Empathetic

The textual analysis proved that the cases were filled with dramatic elements comprising pre-trial events dramatizing the murders of Altantuya Shaaribu and

Noritta Samsuddin (Wilson and Faridah 2009). The details were akin to storytelling which according to Fairbairn (2002) can be used to develop empathy and understanding in practitioners of the caring professions. Empathy is believed to be central to skilled and ethical caring. In terms of feelings and emotions, it describes the personal connectivity the crime reporter seen as the moral agent has with his/her intended victim or victim's family. The fact that they were considerate and conscious of what may occur in relation of the news reports towards the families was a clear indication of the sympathetic and empathetic nature of the crime reporters. The quotes from the interviews will justify that in both cases the crime reporters in the three newspapers were concerned about how their reporting would affect the individuals involved.

The reporters were also driven by emotions to make decisions. This ensured the way they reported their stories and the amount of emphasis or details given or not to a particular situation. Emotions can often aid good decisions. Making as this can allow the feel of injustice, sympathy and empathy for certain situations or someone. In this case the crime reporters interviewed proved that they were more of the ethical altruist where they were more concerned with the victim and the victim's family instead of him or herself. Informant A from *Utusan Malaysia* mentioned that they focused on the consequence of their actions before they carried out their actions although this was done on "auto pilot" without a second to pause. Informant D from *Sin Chew Daily* mentions that he thought about the consequence towards the victim's family and this prevented him from writing too detailed about the case



which could embarrass or put a lot of strain on the family.

Because you want, you have to think about the family, how they would feel after that.

As mentioned in the quote it is clear that as much as the informant was emphatic towards the victim and their family. Informant F from *Sin Chew Daily* also felt that a story should not be reported if the outcome would cause hurt. The consequence here was in relation to the best outcome of the action towards themselves, the papers and the victim.

We cannot write unnecessarily because the consequence to the reader is great..cannot be unnecessary, have to be according to ethics.

It is clear to see that emotions and feelings have played a role in the consequential element of decision making here. The informants, crime reporters who are moral agents, mentioned feeling sad or sympathetic towards the victims and this can be seen in the comment given by Informant E from *Sin Chew Daily*.

We would be unhappy, If it was me...if all our personal issues were published for people to read we too would be embarrassed.

Informant F felt the main point is “*not to hurt the victims’ family members feeling*” and doing this will ensure everything will be fine. Nevertheless one of the informant felt that when the story is sensational and when competition is great there is no time to think about the feelings of the family.

According to informant B from *Utusan Malaysia*, in relation to the Noritta Samsuddin case:

Surely I think this story is unique. Its true because at that time everyone never thought about the family. At that time there was nothing. What was important was competition.

He stressed that as a crime reporter he felt strongly in respecting the right of the victims family and felt pity for what they would read in the newspaper. Meanwhile Informant H from *The Star* states that he would take into consideration the request of the victims family if they wanted him to not write a particular detail. Although he would not omit the detail if it is a strong fact in the case nevertheless, he would be subtle.

We won’t be very direct so that means basically you don’t hurt anybody in the process.

In reference to Noritta’s case, if her parents were to request the journalist not to write about her multiple sexual partners then informant H from *The Star* stressed that they would write it as ‘police are investigating that more than one assailant could be involved’ so there is a way to go around it. Informant G from *The Star* meanwhile was specific in mentioning that his actions were carried out with the idea that it would be for the greater good and produced benefits for others. But the researcher feels that as much as it would be ideal to embrace Bentham and Mills idea of measuring consequence in terms of the happiness of the greatest number from a journalistic perspective and especially in terms of crime reporting it is impossible to achieve beyond the quantity. Elements such as a



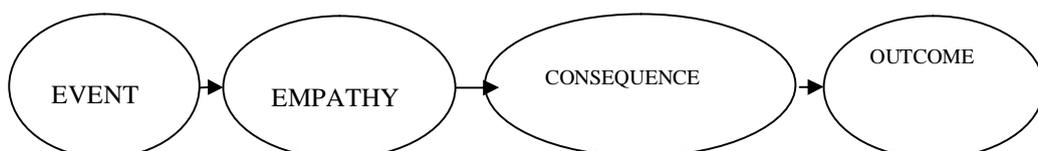
reporters sense of right and wrong, commitment to ethical principals and the public's right to know influences this perception.

Kant mentions that emotion is not part of a person. The identity of moral agents, in this case crime reporter, is composed entirely of reason and will. In this study it can be said that through emotion the crime reporters see suffering, embarrassment and humiliation. It appears Kant's ethics has little for such responses of the emotional kind. For Kant moral actions come from the head (reason) and not the heart (feeling) and the researcher, based on the findings believes that good decisions come from a combination of both and sometimes it also depends on the situation at hand. In this case informant H from *The Star* mentions that at times, the family members request that the reporters don't mention certain detail for fear of embarrassment and upon a 'special' request and the crime reporters somewhat driven by sympathy, comply to these requests.

Kant stresses that one can think of oneself and figure out what is right and wrong. The sense of autonomous moral motivation should be devoid of sympathy and empathy but by moral law makes Kant's explanation that one cannot make

decisions motivated by empathy and sympathy alone. According to Hinman (2003) some philosophers have criticized utilitarianism because of the role or lack of a role that it gives to emotions in the moral life. It can be said that utilitarianism account of the relationship between morality and emotions centers around the question of how crime reporters relate emotions, deeply held beliefs and reasoned commitments. They consider other peoples emotions and beliefs and should be given equal weight in decision making. The consideration for another's feelings, in this case the victims and their families are indirectly relating to the consideration for consequence of an action to be carried out. The findings and figure 1 shows that most of the crime reporters relating to the case interviewed mentioned that they put themselves 'in that situation' and would feel 'embarrassed' if they were to read a similar account if they were a victim and this in turn made the crime reporters more sensitive to the plight of those involved and this influenced the extent or perimeters of writing they wanted to do.

FIGURE 1: Influence of Empathy In Decision Making



It is clear therefore that this research concurs with scholars in the literature



who states that journalists are generally guided by the internal or intrinsic qualities and this strongly predicts ethical decision making. In this study, it was revealed that the crime reporters were clear on their stand to reveal details of the victims of the said details were facts which was revealed by reliable sources such as the police. Other information pertaining to graphic descriptions of the victims' rape for instance or her character or morality was issues which the crime reporters were careful and cautious about revealing.

Therefore the researcher believes that a lack of empathy on the part of the crime reporters may lead to not only insensitive reporting but insensitive information gathering especially in the form of interviewing. Empathy nevertheless can be used in part of decision making as it helps crime reporters from being harsh and at times inhumane. Negotiating empathy as an emotion a crime reporter can discuss this with his or her editors and come to a mutual agreement as to how a fact should be presented without tarnishing or further humiliating the victim or suspects and or their families. But at the same time empathy should not be used as an excuse as when facts are presenting itself in the form of official sources as the job of the reporter is just that – to report.

Summary & Conclusion

The media in Malaysia practice the social responsibility theory (Safar Hasim, 1996) therefore simply put, the journalist should be responsible for their news reports or news coverage. Journalists should see themselves as satisfying their profession commitment to objectivity by looking at the story from both sides; assessing the

conflicting claims and credibility of their sources; looking for the evidence in any issue; and not publishing anything which is untrue (Tuchman, 1972). Objectivity, credibility, accuracy, respect for source and those involved must take precedence over economics, although, it is an important element as well in ensuring the newspaper as a product and a business. There leaves much to be desired as to what extent an issue on crime can be discussed in the Malaysian newspaper in terms of highlighting or downplaying facts of the case. There is no clear guideline for a reporter and especially a crime reporter to ensure that strict ethical guidelines are followed when selecting, gathering, writing and editing information. In summary, the responsibilities of a crime reporter and his inability to ensure a more timed and predictable job description is almost close to impossible. With this in mind the challenge here is, apart from understanding the role and function of the crime reporter it is important then to understand that the decision making process more so an ethical one is an even greater challenge. But the solution then is to not enforce a framework or model or codes of ethics but to first understand what would work for this specialized group of reporters when they are faced with an onslaught of crimes stories which need to be covered in a day.

The sensitivity a journalist must employ when dealing with victims of violence for instance is crucial. Reporters as mentioned by Cote and Simpson (2000), have the potential to add to the injury or help in the recovery therefore compassion and empathy are qualities that should be promoted by those in charge of the news for instance crime reporters who are constantly portraying victims, suspects and their families and the acts of crime



inflicted on those involved as life's worst experiences can be told in the press in away that serves the public good. The researcher concurs with Rogers (1975) that "perhaps the most important statement of all is that the ability to be accurately empathic is something which can be developed by training and this is especially likely to occur if their supervisors are themselves individuals of sensitive understanding."

The solution here then is that ethical decision making as a process is crucial in actually attaining the desired outcome and therefore great emphasis should be placed on how a decision is made and what elements are considered when this decision is made. It can be seen that crime reporters personal values, motives, the employer or in this case the media organisation or even the public as the reader is seen as being important in the decision making and therefore in this study it is extremely important to discover what elements are deemed important for crime reporters in their decision making before and during coverage of a crime story and in some ways this discovery will then help newspaper organizations, sources, academics and fellow journalists understand the intricacies of the practice of a crime reporter and the knowledge of how to ensure better or quality journalism is practice. Crime reporters and every reporter in every beat should keep up with the traditional values of journalistic writing and reporting paying close consideration to the truth, objectivity and the public interest.

References

- Anderson, D. & Leigh, F. (1992), "How newspaper editors and broadcast news directors view media ethics". *Newspaper Research Journal*, 13, page 112-122.
- Berkowitz D. & Limor Y . (2003), "Professional Confidence and Situational Ethics: Assessing the Social – Professional Dialectic, Journalistic Ethics Decisions", *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Winter 80(4): 783.
- Black J., Steele B. & Barney R. (1993), "Doing ethics in journalism: A handbook with case studies", Greencastle, IN: The Sigma Delta Chi Foundation and the Society.
- Boeyink, David. (1995), "How Effective are Codes of Ethics? A look at Three Newsrooms", *Journalism Quarterly*, 71(4): 893-904.
- Burns, L.S. (2002), "Understanding Journalism", London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Fairburn,G.J. (2002). "Ethics, Empathy and Storytelling in professional development. Learning in Health and Social care", Issue 1, pp 22-32.
- Faridah Ibrahim & Mus Chairil Samani. (2000), "Etika Kewartawanaan", Second Edition, U.K.M. F.A.R.Publishers.
- Ferrell,O.C. & Gresham,L.(1995), "A Contingency Framework for understanding Ethical Decision Making in marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, 49:87-99.
- Gans. H. (1980), "Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News,



- NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time", New York. Patheon Books.
- Hausman, C.(1990), "The decision making process in journalism", Chicago – Nelson Hall.
- Hinman L. (2003), "Ethics. A Pluralistic approach to moral theory", Third Edition, Thompson Publishers.
- Landauer & Rowlands. (2001)," Importance of philosophy", Para 2.
http://www.importanceofphilosophy.com/Ethics_Main.html. Retrieved 9 March 2006
- Morin, R. (1986), "Newsroom ethics: How tough is enforcement?", A report of the American Society of Newspaper Editors Ethics Committee, Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 2,7-16.
- Patterson P.,& Wilkins L.(1997), "Media Ethics: Issues and Cases", 4th Ed., McGraw Hill.
- Rogers. C.R.(1959), "A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.) Psychology: a study of a science", vol III, Formulations of the person and the social context, New York: McGraw Hill, Pp. 184-256.
- Rogers.C.R.(1975), "Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being"