Between Ideals and Realities:

Elucidating the Role of the Media in Promoting Human Rights

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Content of the dissertation

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Abstract

The presence and influence of the media in modern times has increased to a point where they have seamlessly permeated every aspect of contemporary life, a situation that has led some to attribute them ideal qualities to promote and strengthen human rights values, while others perceive their commercial interests as an obstacle to perform such a task. This dissertation analyses the role of the media in promoting human rights, based primarily on a theoretical discussion which examines the problem from four different angles: the idealistic perception mainly promoted by the United Nations; the realistic notion defended by media theories; the challenges to the traditional media structure posed by the spread use of ICTs; and the analysis of the main contributions and limitations of the theory of Development Communication in merging both the idealistic and the realistic perceptions. The discussion revealed the existence of both common grounds and well as constraints for the media to perform the task of promoting human rights, a main conclusion being the perception that their role –although relevant- is only a supportive one, which needs to be seen in conjunction with the collaboration of other social agents in order to fully strengthen human rights values and standards.

Introduction

Over the years, the United Nations and its associated bodies have produced more than 41 documents emphasizing the importance of communication and information –and thus that of the media- in the attainment of social progress and development, and in promoting and strengthening human rights values and standards around the world (Carlsson, 2003:36). In that context, the aim of this Master's dissertation is to critically analyse the role of the media when it comes to promoting human rights principles, evaluating, on the one hand, their ideal suitability to perform such a task; and on the other, examining the realities that constrain work of the media.

This dissertation is divided in four chapters and each one of them focuses individually on a specific facet of the problem. The first chapter concentrates on analysing the foundations of an ideal partnership between the media and the United Nations, examining both their strengths and their limitations. The second chapter progresses into critically considering the realities of such a partnership, particularly from the perspective of the media themselves, their core theories and the view of media professionals.

The dissertation's discussion moves forward in its third chapter so as to incorporate an evaluation of the impact associated with the arrival of information and communication technologies, and the challenges presented to the traditional media structure, specifically in relation to the opening to the public sphere of a wider segment of society. Finally, the forth chapter analyses the different paradigms of the Development Communication theory, examining their main contributions and limitations in the quest to merge both the idealistic vision of a committed media and the realities of a business-minded industry.

Although the dissertation is primarily based on the foundation of a theoretical discussion, the analysis of examples and case studies is also incorporated so as to illustrate better both the advantages and the conflicts arising from an idealistic and realistic perception of the media, with regard to their responsibility for promoting human rights. Lastly, the dissertation presents a summary with the main conclusions from each chapter and offers some recommendations for future research.

Chapter One

The media and the UN: An idealised partnership?

"No more doxa –cries the postmodern critic- yet no more episteme either: no marches forward to absolute ideas, no proletarian revolutions, no technological utopias"
(Mann, 2002:162)

These are –as many thinkers have argued- postmodern times (Mann, 2002:159). It has also been said that this time is dominated by the prominence of the economy of mass consumption, in which the creation of "an unappeasable appetite for goods, services and personal fulfilment" (Lasch, 1979:136-37) is the imperative. It has been suggested too, that "we live in an era of mass culture and mass media (…) [in which] reality is media-mediated and the image has taken precedence over concrete product, political theatre over debate, simulacrum over the physical thing" (Baudrillard, in Mann 2002:160). Cynicism, some have argued bluntly, is the dominant ideology of our time (Sloterdijk, in Douzinas 2000:12).

Within such a paradigm, one could argue whether the defence of core moral principles like those of human rights still has any relevance, and moreover, if whether the postmodern, consumption-ridden mass media are the best outlet for this crusade. On the one hand, given the massive presence of the media and their apparent power of persuasion over society, one could actually see a UN-mass media partnership making considerable progress. The idea of such a partnership has been drawn in many UN documents, such as in Article 15 (g) and 18 of the Development and International Cooperation in the Twenty-first Century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based global economy [ECOSOC] (2000); Article 20 of the Millennium Declaration (2000); and in UN Resolution 64/82 (2010), all of which highlight the importance of building strong relationships between the United Nations and sectors of civil society, among which the role of the media has been particularly emphasised. Essentially, at the core of the role of the media lie raising awareness and promoting the engagement of the public on topics such as human rights and development;

and for their part, the UN would contribute as a reliable source of information and professional training for journalists (Bird, E. Et al, 2008:1-3).

However, on the other hand, the alleged postmodern imprint of the media may as well be signalling a venture doomed to fail, since according to Baudrillard, the mass media would have been dominated by an increase in the amount of information, at the expenses of a reduction of meaning (in Webster, 2006:20). In this light, the aim of this chapter would be to analyse whether this partnership, as proposed in many UN documents is indeed an ideal one, or if by overlooking the nature of the media it has more in common with an idealised chimera.

An ideal scenario

A quick glance at the media-saturated reality would not only reveal the media's unavoidable presence, but also their "ability to integrate [themselves] seamlessly into the rhythm of everyday life" (Gies, 2008:29). Though theorists such as Kapuscinski (1999:1) have accurately pointed out the fact that nowadays there are still millions across the globe who don't have access to any sort of media outlets, it would be hard to dispute that for a large proportion of the world population, the mass media do constitute a significant part of contemporary social life, to the point that many theorists assert that "information is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days" (Webster, 2006:9). Arguably, such an advantageous situation could be regarded as powerful –although not precisely based on the discredited media effects theories (McQuail, in Gies 2008:9) - but rather on their unquestionable capacity to reach and to influence a vast quantity of people.

This power of the media –which in the context of this dissertation would refer exclusively to the news outlets both in their traditional and new media contexts- in shaping people's perceptions, has been the subject of much debate and studies. Marsh and Melville (2008) suggest that with "the massive technological developments in the mass media in the first half of the twentieth century, there was a widely held belief that the media had a tremendous influence on people and that they could exert a powerful hold on society (p.17). Perhaps this belief was the justification behind documents such as the Declaration of Mass Communication Media and Human Rights (1970), and the

Declaration on Fundamental Principles concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and International Understanding, to the Promotion of Human Rights and to Countering Racialism, apartheid and incitement to war (1978).

These documents highlight the importance of the mass media and its *leading contribution* to "the strengthening of peace and international understanding, the promotion of human rights and the countering of racialism, apartheid and incitement of war" (Unesco, 1978: Art.1). They also emphasise the belief that "the mass media (…) contribute to eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding between peoples" (Ibid. Art.3). Likewise, the Council of Europe (1970) also recalls in its declaration the conviction that the "press and other mass media (…) perform an essential function for the general public [which should be carried out] with a sense of responsibility towards the community and towards the individual citizens" (Art. A(1); B).

When analysing the ideal responsibilities and "complex demands" (Gies, 2008: 98) placed on the mass media by the UN, it could be argued that one of the strongest demands is in relation to its alleged educational potential. This is highlighted in the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace (1999), when it says that "the educative and informative role of the media contributes to the promotion of a culture of peace" (Art.7). Unesco (1970) also reinforces this social function by saying that "the mass media have an essential part to play in the education of young people in the spirit of peace, justice, freedom, mutual respect and understanding (…)" (Art.5).

All these documents have their foundation –and arguably they can only be achievable- within the context of a society -and a government- that acknowledges the human right to freedom of expression granted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art.19), in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (Art. 19), in the European Convention on Human Rights (Art. 10); and also the right to freedom of information granted by the United Nations in the Resolution 59 (I) adopted in 1946. In this light, the responsibility of the state to respect the independence of the media and to guarantee the right to access to public information is seen as a requisite for the media to be able to fulfil the role assigned by the United Nations (Council of Europe, 1970: Art.4).

According to Keeble (in Allan, 2005) this ideal picture of a mass media concerned about their essential contribution to the strengthening of human rights standards -as

portrayed in several UN documents- wouldn't necessarily be in conflict with an ethical approach of the media which is known as the 'standard professional approach', which basically focuses on the journalist's commitment to codes of ethics as a way to "promote a collective conscience of the profession and the notion that journalists have a social responsibility to serve the public interest" (p.55), while conversely, it could prove inconsistent with different ethical positions as will be discussed later. This principle of serving the public interest is highlighted in several internationally recognised codes of ethics such as the Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists (1986, Art 1), and in the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism (1983, Principle III).

As Ife (2004) explains "the important thing about professional codes of ethics is not the ethical codes themselves but the morality that lies behind them" (p.128). In this light, it could be argued that this particular ethical approach of the media as committed to the public interest would be compatible with the "ontological presupposition" of human rights as described by Douzinas (2000). According to his view, human rights are founded in the "principles of human equality and freedom, and their political corollary, the claim that political power must be subjected to the demands of reason and law" (p.1), and it could be added, to the scrutiny of the mass media and the public opinion.

This ethical approach also coincides with the liberal role of the mass media as a main contributor to the strengthening of democracy, mainly by "assisting citizens in the exercise of their right to democratic scrutiny" (Gies, 2008:93) and by "exposing corruption and abuses of power which are considered the main threat to individual freedom" (Hackett, in Allan 2005:86). Leaving aside –just for the moment- the question of whether the media can actually live up to the UN and society's expectations, the fact seems to be that for the mass media the tag of 'watchdog' of democracy is a source of pride, specially for journalists and news organisations (Gies, 2008:98). It could be argued that when the Resolution 59 (I) of the United Nations stresses the importance of freedom of information –embodied in great deal in a free press- "as a fundamental human right and the touchstone of all freedoms (…) [and] an essential factor in any serious effort to promote the peace and progress of the world", it reinforces the belief in the great

commission entrusted to the media, and their responsibility towards the construction of a stronger democracy and the promotion of human rights values.

It seems that a partnership between the media and the UN not only would have sufficient ontological grounds, but given that "the idea of human rights provides an alternative moral reference point for those who would seek to reaffirm the values of humanity" (Ife, 2004:1), it could be said that such a partnership would ultimately help improve the social commitment of the media, resulting quite possibly in the empowerment of society as a whole. The term "human rights journalism" (Heinze and Freedman, 2008:62) has been used already to signify a mass media which strives to report "the overall state of human rights in the world" (Ibid.) in a consistent and fair way. That quality of journalism to "reflect the different aspects of the subject dealt with" (Unesco, 1978:Art.1) –or in media jargon, contextualising- would alone make a striking contribution to the success of the partnership. It looks *ideally* simple to achieve.

From ideals to idealisation

Ideals –those basic principles or fundamental moral intuitions (Flynn, 2000:5)- find their greatest obstacle in the face of "this non-ideal world" (Carens, 1996:156). Douzinas (2000:9) refers to these obstacles as *empirical difficulties*, in other words, the practical challenges that ideals –human rights or otherwise- have to overcome in order to fulfil their realisation. Needless to say, such a task is not an easy one to attain. It could be argued that, although sharing a relevant ethical foundation –namely their social responsibility to serve the public through the strengthening and promotion of human rights- a UN-mass media partnership would encounter several empirical problems, the first one being the presumption that the mass media –as a united entity- would frame their activity within that particular ethical context. By not taking reality into account –one could argue- ideals could have turned into mere idealisations.

In this context, the notion of idealisation would be used as "to indicate the tendency to abstract and to exaggerate the supposed advantages, or to ignore the perceived deficiencies of a phenomenon" (Bromley, in Allan 2005:319). In the first category, one of the main abstractions in relation to the media is perhaps their

overestimated reach and influence. In this sense, Kapuscinski (1999) highlights the fact that even with all the contemporary technological advantages, the mass media only reach a moderate proportion of the world's population, asserting that in vast regions of Africa, the television, the radio and even newspapers are inexistent. In his view, to state that "the whole of humanity live their lives by what the media do or say is an exaggeration" (p.1).

But even within the Northern confines -where the mass media are arguably in their element- some theorists affirm that "mainstream print journalism reaches only a small and also rather privileged population" (Heinze and Freedman, 2008:8). Certainly, there is –at least in the Northern context- an evident overexposure to the mass media, but that wouldn't necessarily translate into an exposure to the ideals of human rights that an UN-media partnership aspires to promote. Far from it, Gies (2008) identifies as "a problematic aspect of the media culture [its] degree of superficiality, which impedes the kind of in-depth discussion and analysis which one would expect in an ideally working public sphere" (p.29). Furthermore, Kapuscinski (1999) asserts that "often, particularly in Latin America and Asia, the only function of television is to entertain" (p.1), although according to recent studies, it could be argued that such a premise could also be applicable to television in most Western countries (International Council on Human Rights Policy [ICHRP], 2002: 64-65).

Another major overstatement about the mass media is their alleged influence over society. Although there is little disagreement on the repercussions of the mass media in the formation and change of public opinion, it can be argued that there is still a common delusion about the effects of mass media on people -especially negative effects- which is evident for example, in the abundance of "well-supported theory explaining why and when exposure to media violence causes increases in aggression and violence" (Anderson et al, 2003:24). This perception has derived most likely from the many studies conducted under the label of 'media effects' which suggested that "the media could be used as a powerful way of controlling people's behaviour and manipulating their thoughts" (Marsh and Melville, 2008:21).

In this light, Gies (2008) points out that "the power of the media in orienting society tends to be inflated in such a way that other relevant factors are neglected or marginalised" (p.69). Marsh and Melville (2008) also emphasise the short-sightedness of

the 'media effects' studies and therefore the weakness of their conclusions, which in essence ignore the fact "people are individuals who live in social networks of families, friends and colleagues and do have a degree of choice and free will" (p.16). Arguably, this suggests that the media could provide an initial contact with 'raw' information, which would then be passed through the filter of personal experiences and social relationships to acquire its final significance.

According to this context, it could be said that the mass media -although influential- do not account as the sole origin of people's perception of reality, in fact, many theorists of the post-modern era have considered that our media-saturated reality has degenerated into a sort of *social cynicism*, in which the messages of the media – including quite possibly the news media- are perceived as 'fabricated'. Webster (2006) suggests that "as a result [of media overexposure] signs lose their meaning and people simply take what they like from [them]" (p.20). It could be argued that if this position is accurate, even messages about human rights violations could be perceived by the public as having an ulterior motive or no meaning at all, which would in consequence hinder the expectations of the idealised UN-media partnership.

But perhaps one of the main sources of idealisation comes from the ethical framing the UN has identified in documents such as the Unesco (1978) one. Certainly, for a UN-media partnership to work efficiently the mass media would have to be fully committed to the principles and values contained in the UN documents, a condition that wouldn't necessarily be in contradiction to the social responsibilities of the media, as evidenced in the existence of recognised journalism codes of ethics, however, the idealised abstraction derives from ignoring that this particular ethical framing is only one of the various ethical perspectives identified when analysing the mass media –and one could argue- not the prevalent one.

In Journalisms: Critical Issues (2005) Keeble suggests that when it comes to ethical positions of the mass media, there are at least four main stances. One of them –the *standard professional*- which would be the one that lies closer to the UN ideal perspective has been already presented. A second ethical position would be a *cynical-amoral* approach which suggests that journalists have very little concerns about ethical issues. Keeble asserts that "under this perspective, the main driver of the media would be

profit-making and ratings, and thus all talks of ethics is idealistic humbug" (p.54). The perception that the media "have abandoned their quest for truth in pursuit of profit" (Gies: 2008:11) -although arguably disturbing- is shared by the public according to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2005). Their findings concluded that most people believe that "news organisations, when deciding what stories to report, care more about attracting the biggest audience rather than about keeping the public informed" (p.7).

Another ethical approach –called the *relativist* one- suggests that in a '24-hour news and entertainment culture" (Gies, 2008:11), it would be idealistic and utterly unrealistic to consider that journalists are "going to consult the union's code of ethics while struggling to meet a deadline" (Keeble, in Allan 2005:55). The fast-paced reality of the newsroom –where decisions about what lead to follow and what story to cover are a constant editorial demand- is arguably a factor that would limit a proper ethical consideration of the subject being dealt with, as well as its reporting. In this light, despite the ideal conception of a media which would accurately reflect every aspect of the information as portrayed in the declaration of Unesco (1978: Art.1), reality seems to reveal that "detailed analysis and contextual data are too lengthy for the bite-sized format of contemporary news output" (Harrop, 2005:2).

Lastly, Keeble (in Allan, 2005) identifies a fourth ethical approach which is called the *liberal professional* view. According to this theorist, this perspective would be characterised by the 'decline in the public service ethos and the supposed emphasis throughout all the dumbed-down media on celebrities, randy royals, sporting heroes and reality television" (p.55). In this light, it could be argued that this approach contradicts the social role of 'watchdog' the media are supposed to play –rightfully or not- in the context of democracy. Gies (2008) argues that "the watchdog model may have worked well in a mythical era (…) but it has limited appeal in the epoch of mass democracy" (p.98). It seems that instead of being perceived as an arena for public debate, "the media are seen as largely driven by the market and consumer demands" (Marsh and Melville, 2008:32).

All evidence seems to point out the business-minded approach of contemporary mass media, in detriment to their social responsibilities to serve the public as it would be

required to do in an ideal UN-media partnership. In analysing the specific role of newspapers in Britain, Sparks (in Allan, 2005) asserts without hesitation that they are "first and foremost businesses. They do not exist to report news, to act as watchdog for the public (…) to defend ordinary citizens against abuses of power or to do any of the fine and noble things that are sometimes claimed for the press. They exist to make money, just as any business does". In such a context, it could be argued that the ethical distance between the ideal UN-media partnership and the business-driven model, has also evolved into a language social detachment: while the ideal, socially-conscious partnership would refer to people as citizens or public; the real, business-ridden media would see them as audiences, consumers and targets.

According to Hackett (in Alan, 2005) this change of language could have relevant implications. He suggests that "from the democratic standpoint, the two concepts are radically different. Citizens implies active participation in civic affairs; consumers implies the more private and passive role of material consumption" (p.87). Although the analysis of the relation between the direct involvement of society and the media would be thoroughly examined in the third chapter, it would be necessary to highlight at this point that from this angle, news and information seem to be conceived as commodities, not as a public service. Following that logic, the aim of the media would be to make the news as attractive as possible, in order to broaden their 'target' and make their 'product' more 'appetizing'. As Harrop (2005) explains:

> "News segments are designed to be short, sharp and sexy and to educate the audience instantaneously. To help meet this objective, news reporting may be sensationalised so that its messages are more obvious and immediately digestible. In any number of news items, consumers are given a black and white version of grey reality where selected facts paint an impactful, morally simplistic picture" (p. 4)

It could be argued that the perception of the media as just another business, and its two main consequences -their product (information) being treated as a commodity, and their targets (citizens) being treated as consumers- would be a major setback in the

ideal conception of the UN-media partnership, and moreover, it would be in clear opposition with current human rights legislation. In this light, the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) clearly states that the exercise of freedom of expression "carries with it duties and responsibilities" (Art.10 (2)). Gies (2008) also asserts that "the right of the press to disseminate information correlates with the right of the public to receive information [thereby] the public interest is a weighty factor in assessing the way in which media actors exercise their freedom" (p.93).

Interestingly, while on the one hand the public has an unquestionable right to be timely and accurately informed, some "studies have shown that the public does not necessarily have an appetite for the broader truth it claims to have the right to" (Harrop, 2005:3). Some of these studies were conducted during the Gulf War, and revealed that a significant proportion of the public objected to the transmission of images of casualties from their own country, while not showing the same objection to images of casualties from a perceived enemy (Knightly, in Harrop 2005:7). Although this position has been regarded as a "myth" by some theorists (ICHRP, 2002:57), arguably, the fair coverage of a subject not only would require a greater investigative effort from the journalist, and a socially-conscious ethical commitment of the news organisation, but it also would need the participation of a committed citizenry.

In the Recommendation concerning education for international understanding, co-operation and peace and education relating to human rights and fundamental freedoms (Unesco, 1974), the concept of 'international education' signals the necessity and importance to perceive all humanity as valuable and deserving of equal treatment and respect (I (b)). Arguably, this highlights the importance of the educative role of the media in building up a culture of respect and consideration for the human rights of all people, without distinction of their alliances, especially since the mass media –as the document stresses- represent in most cases the only source of 'knowledge about international affairs' (VIII, 38) for many people, which constitutes –one could say- the basis of their great responsibility to reflect and report every issue accurately, fairly and as objectively as possible.

A different take on idealisation

If on the one hand idealisation could be nothing more than a mere distortion of ideals –arguably impossible to materialise and thus the basis of a false set of expectations- on the other, "idealisation [could] reveal what is real, but is usually hidden from view by a mass of detail" (Smith, 1999:12). In this light, it could be argued that despite the many constraints of the media to fulfil their social role, their capacity to reach and influence a great proportion of society –both locally and globally- although hidden, is still real. The Unesco declaration (1978) realises the "complexity of the problems of information in modern society" (Preamble), but nevertheless, insists in the valuable opportunity for them to play an active role in building up a culture of peace, understanding and mutual respect.

Unesco (1974) also recognises the "wide disparity between proclaimed ideals, declared intentions and the actual situation" (Preamble) that still exists, not only in the case of the media, but also with regard to the acceptance and application of human rights instruments and principles in the world. In this context, some have argued that "education is the only way to bridge this gap, and [that] one way to reach the broadest possible audience is through the utilisation of the national media" (Moore, 2006:4). It has been discussed already some of the main empirical challenges the ideal media-UN partnership would face in reality, inter alia, their business-driven ethics and the 'three S's' structure of the news: short, sharp and sexy, which basically would limit the quality of information that people would receive. However, there is still a key actor that needs to be considered when analysing the real possibilities of the educative role of the media: the journalist.

Arguably, the final piece of information received by the public through the media has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by several actors such as editors, media owners, stakeholders, advertisers and the public. However, the input from the journalist is still the main driving force behind the way the information is investigated and presented to the public opinion, which is why its own competence about human rights values, principles and instruments is of considerable importance (Harrop, 2005:13). Nevertheless –and contrary to what would be expected- it has been asserted that "journalists rarely receive formal training in theory or practice on international human rights" (Heinze and

Freedman, 2008:7), therefore, many human rights issues may not have been deliberately ignored by the journalist, but rather they wouldn't have been perceived as such by the untrained journalist (ICHRP, 2002:97).

In this sense, the ICHRP report (2002) affirms that "the media have to think seriously about the way they cover some [human rights] issues, and about their responsibility to do so accurately [which] may require new forms of training for journalists" (p.94). This premise has been the platform for developing a human right-based training specifically for journalists. The organisation Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) has been training journalists in Canada –where the organisation is based- and also in African countries like Ghana.

The vision of this organisation is that by providing local journalists with a comprehensive training programme, news stories would be covered "with integrity and a firm knowledge of human rights" (Moore, 2006:6). They have declared that their overall aim is "to make everyone in the world fully aware of their rights" (Ibid), an assertion that is arguably founded in the UN ideal in which the media would have a relevant role to play in strengthening the democratic process.

Interestingly, a research investigating the effects of the human rights training programme provided by this organisation (in the context of Ghana), found that although after the training many journalists still struggled to make a connection between the human rights instruments and the perceived abuses (Ibid. p.30) –which is arguably a necessary element to educate people about their rights effectively- they did manifest a positive correlation between the inclusion of human rights reporting, the education of citizens and the reinforcement of democracy" (Ibid. p.32), which could ultimately signal that idealisation -instead of being a source of false expectations- may just be the envisioning needed to reveal the real possibilities hidden behind the practical challenges. Based on this experience –one could optimistically argue- the ideal partnership between the United Nations and the media has perhaps a real chance.

Conclusion

It has been asserted that "the idea of human rights is one of the most powerful in contemporary social and political discourse" (Ife, 2004:4), and it could be argued that the UN is to a great extent responsible for that situation. The ideals in which this organisation was founded upon –namely freedom and equality for all human beings- have had a resounding effect in the world and are regarded as ethical principles by many people and institutions. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that despite the ample legal international recognition to these standards, "more human rights violations have been committed in this rights-obsessed century than at any other point in history" (Douzinas, 2000:9).

The answer to the question of whether the media can really live up to the expectations of the United Nations, could be somehow related to the answer of whether human kind can actually live up to the ideals-turned-into-standards proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the one hand, reality –as Douzinas has pointed out- seems to offer a clear take on the issue, but on the other, it could be argued that probably it is that utopian idea of a committed media and a committed society, which is keeping people from settling with the status quo, and has ultimately served as a constant motivation to conquer all the *empirical difficulties*. After all, if these are indeed postmodern times, there is no reason why cynicism and idealism can coexist.

Chapter Two

The role of the media: to advocate or not to advocate, that is the question

Objectivity -it is safe to assert- is one of the founding pillars of modern journalism. The news media mantra which declares that "comment is free but facts are sacred" (Allan, 2004:7) is as embedded within the newsroom as it has been questioned by many theorists –and journalists- over the years, not so much because of the value of the principles behind the premise, but rather due to its unrealistic pretensions (Miljan and Cooper, 2003: 41). While under the professional demands for impartiality, advocacy of any kind –even to the cause of human rights- would be considered to be unethical for some, it could be argued that by way of a constant misrepresentation of reality, the media are effectively committing to one side of the story, whether deliberatively or not. To borrow the logic from the initial quote, nothing is more dangerous for human rights, than a news media that fails to report the facts as well as their should.

The aim of this chapter would be to critically consider the role of the media in the context of the promotion of human rights, particularly from the perspective of the media: their theories and their main actors, the journalists. An analysis of theories of objectivity –both a source of obsessive concern and the incarnation of an unattainable ideal- will be followed by the main critiques discrediting the term. Later, an evaluation to the suggestion of the media as already partaking in the promotion of social stereotypes and misconceptions will be presented, specifically within the context of the media depiction of refugees and women. A constant referencing to human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); Unesco (1974) and (1978) declarations; the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993); and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1963) –among

others- will be used as the ethical standards against which to examine the media's performance.

Objectivity: Defenders and Detractors

The Dictionary of Media Studies (2006) defines objectivity as "the idea that news can and should be reported without opinion or bias" (p.161). This principle –although under scrutiny- is still today a pillar of journalism and –it has been argued- a necessity for society. But it wasn't always the case that the news media considered their role as one of impartial public service, and in fact many theorists assert that the media of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were highly partisan and often openly racist (Kaplan, 2001:2; Rhodes in Allan, 2005:31). The advent of the telegraph and the conformation of news agencies such as Associated Press, helped to challenge the function of the media and to develop a sense of professionalism among reporters, ever since their aim was to distribute the news to different media outlets -regardless of their own particular political affiliation- so these had to be as neutral as possible (Allan, 2004:17-18).

According to Kaplan (2001), by the 1920s "the press [had] changed from being a strenuous advocate and ally of the parties to a formally neutral and independent medium of public communication for, ideally, a whole range of political voices" (p.2). Restrepo (2001: 1-2) also acknowledges this particular epoch as one of decisive changes for the media and the journalistic profession. He traces this shift in the media consciousness towards a neutral journalism, to the editorial mandate of A.M. Rosenthal for the New York Times staff, which basically called journalists to strive at news reporting with as much objectivity as it was humanly possible. This fair and impartial approach to news gathering and reporting was later known as the ethics of objectivity, and was identified as a founding principle for the profession, as evidenced by the inclusion of objectivity in many codes of ethics for the media.

One of the earliest explicit inclusions of the term within the canon of journalistic practice, is found in the American Society of Newspapers Editors on 1923, in which impartiality is identified as "the sound practice [of making] clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion", and added that, "news reports should be free

from opinion or bias of any kind" (Allan, 2004:22). More recently, this principle of media fairness and objectivity was also recognized by the Council of Europe (1970) when it expresses that "accurate and well balanced reporting (…) [and] clear distinction between reported information and comments" (Paragraph B (b)) should be a basis for media coverage. Unesco declaration (1978) also acknowledges this practice when it calls journalists to make sure that they "appraise events objectively" (Art. II (2)).

According to Allan (2004), the principle of "objectivity demanded of journalists that their role be delimited to one of facilitating the public's right of access to facts free from partisan values" (p.23), which in the context of the media of the time was arguably not just a professional requirement but also a societal necessity, given the disadvantages faced by many groups which constantly found themselves without representation –or at least without objective representation- in the media. Nevertheless, many journalists at the time contended the growing demand of objective reporting, on the grounds that such a requirement privileged facts ahead of ideas, which in their view did nothing to improve the quality of journalism (Ibid.).

Although the media at the time didn't have the reach and powerful presence of modern times, it could be asserted that they were still one of the institutions that conformed the public sphere, which is the space for social and political conflict where divergent points of view converge and are discussed (Kaplan, 2001:4; Habermas, 1989:27). Arguably, for the media to fulfil their role as a public arena for debate, they would need to provide a neutral approach -which is consistent with the principle of objectivity- and they would also need the existence of a democratic system that allows all opinions to be expressed, a condition which reinforces the link between democracy and the human rights to freedom of information and expression (Newman and Rich, 2004: 7-8). This connection is also recognised in the Declaration of Vienna (1993) when it says that "democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing" (Art. 8).

While on the one hand the advent of objectivity into the newsroom provides an opportunity for an impartial and fairer media, which arguably goes in favour of the democratic system and the betterment of society by giving equal voice and access to all thoughts and positions; on the other, some critics argue that objectivity is no more than an

illusion of the media executed solely for their own gain. In this light, Kaplan (2001) asserts that "the nightmare forces of power, profit and ideology often intrude upon journalism's democratic dreams and disturb its commitments to serve the public without fear or favour" (p.6).

The belief that economic power and the exertion of cultural and political hegemony is the real objective of the media, constitutes the basis of the Marxist critique to the alleged democratic and equality-supportive discourse of the liberal media (Marsh and Melville, 2008:27). Under this perspective, the media wouldn't be as much an agent for social change as it would be one of social, political and economic control (Miljan and Cooper, 2003:45). This hegemonic control -which for Gramsci (in Marsh and Melville, 2008) it refers to "the process by which powerful groups maintain and extend their power through winning the consent of the masses" (p.30) - would consist basically in determining the content of the media and thereby, influencing public agendas (Ibid. p.27).

Many theorists affirm that this hegemonic control has been somewhat enhanced by the increasing concentration of ownership of different forms of media as well as by the phenomenon of globalisation, which not only has expended greatly the reach of the media but also the expansion of the specific ideology they promote (Chomsky, in Marsh and Melville, 2008: 30). In this light, the massive media empire built under the News International Corporation owned by Rupert Murdoch -which groups in Britain media outlets such as The News of the World, The Sun, The Times, The Sunday Times and Sky Television Network; and the Fox Network, The New York Post, The Wall Street Journal as well as the satellite television system Direct TV in the United States- could arguably give a foundation to questions about the independence of the media as well as to the objectivity of their reporting.

In this sense, the ICHRP report (2002) acknowledges the existing pressure on journalists as a direct consequence of the ownership of the news organisations that they work for, affirming for example that "the employees of NewsCorp (…) have seen their reporting on China affected by Mr. Murdoch's business dealing with China" (p.103). This conclusion was also reflected in the analysis of the media carried out by Heinze and Freedman (2008), when they express that contrary to the findings on non-financial media - which presented a more balanced and objective account of human rights violations- "the

financial newspapers painted a different picture, promoting the impression of a country [China] vastly improving its human rights records" (p.22). The fact that one of the financial newspapers analysed was The Wall Street Journal is relevant to their conclusions.

Interestingly, this conflicting situation over calling into question China's reported violations on human rights (Amnesty International Report 2009), goes far beyond the scope of the news that makes it to the mainstream media, as has been noticed by Douzinas (2000), who asserts that "if point-scoring is the symbolic prize behind human rights controversies, trade and market-penetration is often the real stake (…) China has been particularly adept in using trade deals to avoid international opprobrium" (p.126). Douzinas identifies this as the real reason as why no resolution against China has been passed by the United Nations' Human Rights Commission –and one could argue- it is the same reason why news about human rights violations is less likely to figure in any news outlet owned by this corporation.

The problems associated with lack of objectivity –particularly the one resulting from media ownership- have been recognised by the UN Human Rights Council (2010) as a key challenge for the protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The report signals "the growing concentration of ownership of the media [as having] serious potential implications for content diversity" (6(a)). International human rights' legislation such as the Council of Europe (1970) also declares that "the independence of mass media should be protected against the dangers of monopolies (Art. 7), and adds that "neither individual enterprises, nor financial groups should have the right to institute a monopoly in the field of press, radio or television, nor should government-controlled monopoly be permitted" (Art. 8). This arguably challenges corporations such as the one owned by Mr. Murdoch, but also the media conglomerate controlled by Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, since according to a study conducted by the organisation Freedom House (2004), Italy's "free and independent media institutions are threatened by government interference and the highest level of media concentration in Europe" (p.1).

Another conflicting critique surrounding the ideal of objectivity suggests that this cannot be achieved because of the journalists' own prejudices and beliefs, which would inevitably affect the process of selecting, editing and presenting the news

(Glasgow Media University Group, in Marsh and Melville, 2008:31). Miljan and Cooper (2003) also agree with this position and affirm that "a journalist cannot avoid expressing an attitude about what he or she is saying" (p.41). Certainly, this concern has been presented among journalists from the moment objectivity became a professional demand, thus indeed it could be argued that "the struggle with media [and personal] bias is as old as the profession itself" (ICHRP, 2002:84).

This report –which is based on the opinions and collaborations from journalists around the world- confirms that "a strong culture and tradition within journalism asserts that no advocacy of any kind should intrude upon the news columns" (p. 106). However, several studies carried out by the National Media Archive (in Miljan and Cooper, 2003), found that "journalists expressed decidedly firm opinions" (p.43) while reporting facts, which would arguably indicate that although objectivity is a basic ethical principle for journalists, the concept may have more of a theoretical approach rather than a firm base on reality. In this light, Restrepo (2001:2) also asserts that absolute objectivity is an unattainable ideal, as demonstrated when the same fact –when observed by several journalists- it receives as many different treatments and points of view as journalists were reporting, a situation that –one could argue- wouldn't necessarily imply a transgression of the nature of objectivity.

It seems that the essence of the ethics of objectivity lies in reporting the facts as accurately and impartially as possible, rather than in the annulment of the journalists' own views and beliefs. Following this logic, it could be argued that in the context of human rights reporting -far from media advocacy- the real commitment should be to reflect and represent every aspect of the fact impartially and within their right context –as expressed for example in Art. 1 of the Unesco declaration (1978) - instead of the fragmented, skewed and inaccurate reporting that seems to be the norm for so many media outlets (ICHRP, 2002:64-65). Among the reasons for such inaccurate reporting when dealing with human rights issues, the International Council's report (2002) highlights, on the one hand, the journalists' lack of training in human rights legislation; the relative novelty of human rights as a news topic, and also the fact that human rights stories may not be perceived as of interest for their particular audience. On the other

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