

MORE FACTS AND LESS TRUTHS: THE MEDIA HAS ROOM TO STEP UP

By Gustaf Antell (Finland)

Established journalism has been under attack for years now and it is time for the media to learn our lessons. Although most of the criticism is misdirected and due to misinformation, there are real problems that need to be tackled.

Here are some ideas for those journalists who really do care about the role of the media in a democracy.

1. We need to be able to distinguish between facts and truths

- Truth is a useless concept for us and best left to the philosophers. The kind of journalism that contributes to society, rather than take away from it, is fact-based, says Dario Cavegn, Managing Editor at ERR News, the English-speaking department of the Estonian Broadcasting Company.

This might seem obvious both to journalists and the wider audience, but both groups tend to interpret truths as facts most of the time.

Cavegn should know. His job at ERR News is his first in journalism. Before that he worked with marketing.

Marketing, at its best, is about creating truthful stories. Journalism should not be, but the way the media works blurs the distinction between truth and fact and many journalists do not realize it.

The question is not to which degree the media has an agenda, it is more about incompetence.

- When we say that facts are boring and we should put the news into context, we might be blurring the line.

- When we describe a piece of news using words that are not neutral.

Recently, I referred to a law proposal that the Polish government put forward as a reform. Thus, I accepted the government's "truth" as the word reform has a positive connotation.

This was a mistake - a choice of words that I did not even reflect on. I should have.

- When we say that we need a person or a personal story to illustrate what an event means for the common man, we might be blurring the line.

- When we say that every article needs to be written in simple language and that contradictory facts don't belong together - although contradictory opinions are welcome - we might be blurring the line.

We do need context, personal stories and simple language, but we have to see every simplification, every dramaturgical decision and every context as challenges.

Storytelling is required to better reach an audience that has the power to skip everything we produce, but storytelling makes our job more difficult and challenging.

Today, it is more often used as an escape. It is easier to find a case and work on her/his story, than it is to immerse yourself into the facts.

If we do not accept this challenge, we end up estranging parts of our readership - as we have already to an alarming extent - those who cannot identify with the truths we are telling them.

- Truth isn't tangible, fact is, says Dario Cavegn.

2. We have to communicate to the public how the authorities act against the media

Since Poland elected the party Law and Justice, PiS, into power, the government has taken many steps that make life for serious journalists harder.

This list should be required knowledge for everybody who works with news and actualities in Europe (provided by Dorota Głowacka, lawyer and Coordinator of the Observatory of Media Freedom in Poland at the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights):

- a) The government has imposed restrictive media laws and used them. For example, they have introduced a new crime; "defamation of Polish Nation", that has already led to some self-censorship;
- b) They have restricted media and public access to information. Journalists were, for instance, banned from entering parliament for several weeks, representatives of the media have been forcibly removed from reporting sites and recordings in the Constitutional Court are not allowed anymore;
- c) The government introduced a new media law that amounted to a political takeover of public service media. More than 200 people have lost their jobs at the public broadcasters TVP and Polskie Radio since the law was introduced on January 1st, 2016. They have undermined the economic position of many media outlets. This has so far been done by redirecting public adverts to favorable media and claiming high compensations in court cases against media outlets and journalists.

According to leaks from the government, a new media bill will be proposed this autumn that is intended to limit the share of foreign ownership in Polish media.

It is important for all journalists to know what has happened in Poland, to be alert if something similar happens in their own countries and to know how to work against this. If possible.

It is also important to help the voters understand these threats. The Polish government still enjoys big support and might very well win next elections. Naturally, there are already doubts whether there will be free and fair elections in Poland again.

By the time politicians are successful using expressions like "Fake News", "Alternative Facts" and "Post Truth" against the media, we are already loosing, ie democracy is diminishing quickly.

3. We must give the voiceless a voice

A lot of social groups have a valid reason to feel excluded from the media. This is something most journalists have had difficult to understand, as we feel that we do our best to listen to all groups in society.

But we don't. We forget some groups and although we hear what those we talk with say, we don't listen that well.

It is true that journalists interview all kinds of people and it is true that many of our stories are built around an individual who, for example, is marginalized. But we call our interviewees "cases" and we treat them like objects in dramatized news stories.

There is also another way in which we marginalize people. This is what the Latvian anthropologist Anna Žabicka wrote me:

- Marginalized groups are not only left voiceless, but they are also sometimes left outside the information circle. There are dangers leaving them out of information and keeping them voiceless – deeper segregation of society, unexpected outbursts by marginal groups etc.

According to Žabicka, the last elections in the US and the BREXIT-vote are powerful examples of this.

The lack of inclusiveness is in itself possible to understand. But what can we do about it?

- Step one is that we acknowledge that journalists - wherever we work - have a professional and moral obligation to be inclusive, says Anna Žabicka.

There are a number of practical tools that are available online, that are built to help us reach specific groups of people that usually are left outside.

(ANNA - Do you have a couple of examples of tools that you believe in?)

Another important strategy is to introduce journalism courses in all schools and for all ages of children. When people understand the circumstances under which the media works, it is easier to detect whether mistakes are intentional or unintentional.

4. The challenges we face cross borders, so we have to widen our perspectives

Whether we like it or not, what happens in Hungary or Poland, or even in Turkey, has direct consequences for all of us.

Through social media, news and opinions travel faster than ever and more often than not, what happens somewhere else contributes to our internal debates in unpredictable ways.

In the BREXIT-debate, many brexiteers were critical of immigration from Eastern European EU-member countries to the UK. However, in some Eastern European media, this "anti-immigration debate" was portrayed as concerning muslims, rather than Eastern Europeans.

Journalists cannot relax on standards just because the news are about foreign countries.

The Hungarian journalist Anita Kőműves, who worked on the newspaper Népszabadság until the government shut it down in October 2016, and a Fulbright – Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow 2014-2015 - has this additional list of international threats to all media:

- a) a collapse of the financial model - print advertising is declining, online advertising money goes to Google, Facebook et al., and readers are not willing to pay for online content (with few notable exceptions like the NYT)
- b) authoritarian and even democratic leaders are turning audiences against media by labeling them fake news/opposition/serving foreign interests/liar, etc., which erodes trust in journalism. This goes on at a national and international level as well.
- c) in many countries government is becoming less transparent: freedom of information legislation is not respected (requests for information is denied with no or not legally satisfying explanations; journalists are asked to pay exorbitant amounts of money for documents)
- d) state surveillance is increasing, which means that it becomes harder for journalists to convince sources to talk. The fear of the state's powerful surveillance capabilities is increasing

We have to be aware of the situation and we have to be able to discuss these issues with the public.

The truth is that the media is up against opponents that, put in soft words, are lying bastards.

Autocrats like Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and maybe also Donald Trump attack the media not only nationally, but to a significant degree on an international level. They are dangerous to us and we need to work together to fight them.

5. Admit that sometimes we are powerless against the lies used against us

As journalists, most of us work under pressure, with few resources and often against people with multiple budgets to us.

Sometimes, our adversaries do not have the money, but they have a much easier and cheaper task. The Latvian blogger and IT-expert Jānis Polis, who researches networks behind fake media, has emphasized that everyone is exposed to fake news.

- Distribution of fake information is extremely cheap.

It can be almost impossible to detect fake information, lies or slander when done professionally. This also means that everyone has shared fake news either online or in real life. The phenomenon in itself is nothing new.

Witch-hunting might be one of the most famous examples of fake news in history.

To some extent, we can try to refute information that is not correct, but in the long run it will not solve the problem. Polis again:

- The amount of energy necessary to refute bullshit is of an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it.

If we get stuck fighting every attack against the media, our work or ourselves, it will tear us down.

Sometimes a disclaimer works better - or in my words - Untell the story!

We have to make clear when we give facts, that what we write cannot be interpreted as "truths with an agenda".

Sometimes, **we have to point out from the beginning what we are not saying.**

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