

Overcoming narrative's ethical dilemmas

When a person starts talking about overcoming narrative's ethical dilemmas that person is making an assumption that there are ethical dilemmas in narrative journalism. I'd rather say there are choices to be made all along the way - from the time we conceive the story idea, right up to the finished copy.

These junctures of choice, I assume, would be the points where we encounter ethical dilemmas.

Let me start my talk by painting two scenarios:

In the first, I ask two people about a litre bottle that contains 500 ml of brandy. The first person might say it is half empty and the second that it is half full. These two are not just telling me about the quantity of the brandy, they might also be saying something about themselves. The first might be an alcoholic, who starts panicking when the liquor drops to that level and is already worrying about where the next bottle will come from. The second might be indifferent to the brandy – takes it when it is available.

Another scenario: On the morning the pictures of the burning man were published, I received a number of complaints from readers, quoting from the South African Press Code that says; "Due care and responsibility shall be exercised by the press with regard to the presentation of brutality, violence and atrocities." They were arguing that the pictures should not have been used on the front pages where their children could see them. The readers were saying the newspapers should have carried warnings on the front pages in order to give them a choice to show their children or not to show them the pictures.

Another reader was outraged by a policeman in the picture who was laughing as the flames consumed the victim.

And of course yesterday you heard Dave Hazelhurst put the pictures in the category of "images that changed the world".

The readers and Dave demonstrated what was important to them, their values: for the bulk of the readers who complained, protecting their children was important and the world outside was secondary; for the outraged reader who phoned, the behaviour of the policeman in the face

of such horror was important enough to move him to pick up the phone; and for David changing the world is important.

I want to assert that journalism does not simply tell me about the world out there, it also tells us about the values of the journalist.

Zakes Mda yesterday was fascinating. He has reflected deeply on the values that drive his choices as he practises his craft of fiction writing. He is curious – “write about what you don’t know”. He cares for his characters and is compassionate and generous towards them. He uses a voice that does not judge them.

He told us that each of our choices is value-laden and we therefore cannot claim to be objective.

Mda’s growing understanding of the values of *ubuntu* has helped him develop complex and dynamic characters for his novels.

The preamble to the Press Code states why we do journalism: “The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve society by informing citizens and enabling them to make informed judgments on the issues of the time.” (Please get your copy of the code at www.presscouncil.org.za.) It is however not enough that this statement is in the code: each one of us has to answer the question for ourselves.

The answer to that question should assist us as we answer ancillary questions along the way. For example, if I have a story to do, will it be a traditionally structured story or do I tell a narrative? Do I want to tell a narrative because it has a greater chance of winning a Vodacom Award, a Mondi-Shanduka Award, or the Pulitzer Prize? Given my resources of space, time and money, is it the best way of informing and involving the reader?

Tom French yesterday told us why we do narrative journalism: to tell the essential story about being a human being.

Many like my friend Tim Knight, a Canadian journalist, believe every story is a narrative. He says we journalists are tellers of morality tales. I agree with him completely. Only when we don’t have the time or the

resources should we blurt out the bare facts and hope the reader will grasp them and understand this complex post apartheid world.

Narrative is a leisurely engagement with the reader, going through the steps that Kramer has outlined at previous Narrative Journalism Conferences:

“...arranging the action chronologically as experienced by characters in a setting... and telling a story that has a theme, purpose, reason, destination and that it’s worthwhile to ingest.”

I’d like to add that it is a story told with humility; that doesn’t gloat “I’ve nailed the bastard” as it exposes corruption but carries the sadness of seeing an icon of the liberation struggle come crumbling down. It does not carry the prosecutorial tones of the hard news story.

Narrative must still meet the demands of the Press Code: “The press shall be obliged to report news truthfully, accurately and fairly...in context and in a balanced manner.”

Narrative does not give the journalist licence to misquote or distort in order to get a dramatic twist to the story.

And what we publish must be in the public interest, carefully taking into account the impact that the story will have on people’s lives and the consequences of that. I should be clear that I can live with the consequences of my story.

Inspiring conferences like this one give us a chance to reflect on these questions and our values. The answers should become an integral part of ourselves so that we don’t have to think them through when we are in the heat of action and have deadlines to meet. Our values should help us overcome narrative’s ethical dilemmas.

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