A Need for a Stronger Code of Journalistic Ethics in Lebanon?

By: **Sanaa Khoury** posted on Sunday, Aug 19, 2012

"Verify your sources before publication." This is a skill taught to journalism students in the first years of university. You don't need to be an expert to know that it was wrong to publish news of the deaths of four of the kidnapped Lebanese pilgrims in Azaz before confirming the information.

About this Article

Summary:

Lebanese news coverage of kidnapped pilgrims was seen in some quarters as irresponsible, provocative and clumsy. Sanaa Khoury discusses whether a stricter code of journalistic ethics should be adopted in Lebanon with academics and media observers.

Categories : Lebanon

Throughout the past two days, chaos has ruled the television screen. On the one hand, the nature of reporting is open to errors on the part of correspondents, yet on the other hand the media dealt with these events in an irresponsible manner. They were irresponsible in the language the used and the way in which they provoked the public. They should have focused on journalistic truth, transparency, credibility of sources and, most importantly, professional ethics. Nabil Dajani, chairman of the Department of Social Sciences and Media Studies at the American University of Beirut, says that Lebanese media coverage "has been emotional and inconsistent, to the point that journalists appeared to have no concept of professionalism." In his view, "the Lebanese journalist has been transformed into a tool for provocation, rather than someone who provides information. Media organizations compete to excite the public, to see who can get into trouble first."

Nadine Farghal, a lawyer who teaches university courses in journalism ethics, says that what we have seen on the TV screen over the past two days is clear evidence that "all media outlets no longer have a sense of responsibility. They put anything on the screen, without thinking about whether or not that information may affect the safety of those involved or their families."

Nada Abdel Samad, a Lebanese journalist who completed a university study on media abuse in Lebanon from the time of the killing of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri until today, believes that "media outlets in Lebanon have turned into outlets of incitement." In her view, local media channels prefer to be the first to report information, without concern as to whether or not that information is accurate. It has reached the point where "media coverage has turned into a type of theater."

She adds: "Some of the armed groups we have seen on the screen would not have emerged had it not been for publicity, they only come out because they know there will be camera coverage." She asks: "Should a journalist play the role of investigator, to question those who have been kidnapped on the screen, when they have no freedom or free will?"

"Media outlets are acting as though they are in the midst of a war, transporting messages between opposing sides." In her opinion, "press freedom and the need to report quickly cannot justify this lack of responsibility on the part of the media. Live broadcasting was a fundamental part of democracies across Europe following the fall of the Berlin Wall, however live broadcasting cannot be transformed into a means of delivering threats," says Abdel Samad.

Ahmed Zinedine, a professor of media studies at the Lebanese University, feels that Lebanese media outlets no longer maintain professionalism, something that has become clear during the past two days. "Media institutions do not check the news, they allow amateur journalists to broadcast, or journalists who are professional but who are not able to report in a professional manner due to pressure," he says.

Zinedine gives an example of one female reporter who urged authorities take action on the air, he says that media coverage has become moralizing and sanctimonious. According to Zinedine, "It is certainly not a journalist's job to preach. A journalist should present verified information and commentary, without exaggeration or provocation."

He refers to European media outlets, where no report exceeds one minute or one and a half minutes, regardless of its importance. Dima Saber, who was previously a journalism professor at the Pantheon-Assas University in Paris and teaches at the American University of Beirut, says that the field of journalism does not need strict laws, which could limit journalistic freedom. In fact, the opposite is true, she says.

"All that we need is a code of ethics, that would require journalists to confirm information before publishing and prevent them from hastily reporting in a way that would provoke the public. These are obvious concepts that do not require academic minds to realize," said Saber, a founder of the Alt City Organization which specializes in training journalists. Saber believes that traditional television media has lost its credibility.

"With the emergence of alternate sources of media, consumers can now get information from multiple sources. Traditional media outlets must realize that the consumer is not stupid, he or she can distinguish between truth and exaggeration." She asks: "Do those responsible for the newsroom know the price of urgent news? The randomness with which we see news reports scrolling across the bottom of the screen has caused many problems."

Journalism ethics is not a confidential matter. If, for example, you went to BBC's page on the Internet, you would find that they have listed a professional code of conduct. This code of conduct provides instructions and conditions that employees must follow. The same applies to all public television media outlets around the world, such as Al-Jazeera, as well as news agencies and newspapers. However, developing ethical codes has been more difficult. Some such codes began appearing at the beginning of the last century. The Charter of Munich of 1971 [relating to journalism ethics] was implemented by all European media outlets and then later replaced by the unified UNESCO Charter of 1983. These codes of conduct have developed over time to match the needs of the current period and to incorporate considerations for digital media.

All of these codes agree on a wide range of topics, including the importance of press freedom, independence, truth, transparency and verification of sources. These documents also respect individual privacy and warn against resorting to deceptive methods to gain information. They emphasize the need to distinguish between the role of the press and the role of advertising agencies, in addition to the necessity of correcting any information that was published and later proven incorrect. It is also imperative not to endanger the lives of sources or the lives of those involved in investigative journalism. These are the general concepts contained in these codes, but if we dove into the details we would see many more stipulations. For example, some news agencies have put a limit on the price of a gift a journalist can receive in order to prevent bribes. Furthermore, media outlets can expel journalists who use language that incites racism, violence against women or contributes to religious conflict.

Yesterday the National Media Council held a meeting, attended by Minister of Information Walid Daouk, to discuss "how media outlets have dealt with developments in the country." The participants agreed to invite all audio and visual media outlets and news agency directors to a meeting at the minister's office next Friday [Aug. 24] to discuss "the media's role in maintaining calm, relying on verified sources and maintaining civil peace." In a statement issued after the meeting, Daouk said that "media freedom is sacred, but we have examined the way in which media outlets have covered these events and circulated news, and it became clear

to the meeting's participants that they have not been reporting news, but rather provoking the public and fabricating reports."

Abdel Hadi Mahfouz, head of the National Media Council, said: "There is a general sense of resentment on the part of Lebanese citizens and civil society organization regarding the media's recent performance." He stressed the need to apply the law incrementally, beginning with a verbal notice and then a warning, as well as developing an environment that would allow the political system to address these issues and act according to recommendations made by the National Media Council. He emphasized that he hoped that "maintaining freedom of press would not contribute to chaos."

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