



Decoding Media Standards: Holding the Media to Account

By Libby Lloyd

Abstract

Accuracy, fairness and truth are all principles that the media say they are committed to, but how are they bound to these promises? This article looks at the role of regulators (press ombudsman and media councils) in holding the media to account for what they publish and air and explores how gender and media activists can work with and use these bodies to address gender stereotyping in newspapers and on radio and television stations.

Key words

Gender equality, gender stereotyping, media accountability, media regulators, press code

Introduction

“Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist”

The commitment to strive to tell the truth embodied in the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Code of Conduct for journalists forms the basis of media standards for best practice around the world. However, though the concept of truth is essential to ensuring public trust in the news, it is not an uncontested notion or necessarily as neutral as many newspapers and broadcasters might claim. As studies by media academics, activists and organisations such as Gender and Media Southern Africa (GEMSA) and Gender Links

show year after year, truth is often multifaceted and many media outlets fail in this duty as they focus primarily on “official” versions of any story and neglect to tell the truths of how others are affected. Journalists and media organisations, it is argued, are not merely mirrors on the world, but in their selection of what is news, who they choose to interpret this and how they decide to tell stories, inevitably distort the images presented and ignore the realities of millions of people, including women.

The business of producing media is not easy on editors or journalists given hourly, daily and/or weekly deadline pressures and the emphasis of owners on cutting production costs while churning out headlines that will sell. Around the world news is increasingly being treated as yet another commodity, and the diversity and range of news and perspectives reflected in the media is the first victim of this trend. Poor people and those who do not/cannot hire spin doctors to put out their versions of any truth are inevitably ignored and silenced in this relentless drive for profits. Given the feminisation of poverty and the status of women in many parts of the world, including Southern Africa, gender sensitive reporting and the portrayal of women of all classes, ages and abilities in all spheres of society is one of the core victims of platitudes such as “sex sells.”

The seventh principle in the IFJ code states that journalists are obliged not to further discrimination on any basis, and implies that they should actively fight against it, rather than pretend to be passive observers:

“The journalist shall be aware of the danger of discrimination being furthered by the media, and shall do the utmost to avoid facilitating such discrimination based on, among other things, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinions and national or social origins.”

The code ends with the following injunction:

“Journalists worthy of the name shall deem it their duty to observe faithfully the principles stated above. Within the general law of each country the journalist shall recognise in professional matters the jurisdiction of colleagues only, to the exclusion of every kind of interference by governments or others.”

Who though determines whether a journalist is “worthy of the name”? This is where independent regulators come in to hold the media accountable to their principles and to enforce such codes of best practice on behalf of the public. This article explores the role of media accountability mechanisms and how gender activists can engage with these structures to ensure that codes are gender sensitive and that the media is bound to the principles they espouse.

Defining media accountability and mechanisms

It is important up front to clarify what is meant in this paper by the term “regulation” as it can apply to a wide range of areas (including laws and licensing and setting of rules for broadcasters). In this article, however, the phrase is generally used to refer to systems and mechanisms (such as media ombudsman or press/media councils) established to ensure adherence to an agreed-upon code of ethics/standards (such as truth, accuracy and fairness) and therefore facilitate media accountability to the public.

Such media accountability systems do not replace laws such as those dealing with pornography or hate speech, but provide (if effective) an alternative, more efficient, cost-effective and speedy means to hold journalists to account for breaches of an agreed upon code of standards without having to resort to costly court cases. Therefore, they should be a means for gender activists to challenge gender stereotyping in the media.

This article does not in any way deal with the debate of whether industry-established regulators or statutory regulators can best bind media to codes of best practice, but is based on a presumption that independence from government, political parties, sponsors, the media (including owners, editors and journalists) and powerful commercial and other stakeholders is critical if such bodies are to be effective and therefore credible.



Loga Virahsawmy taking her watchdog role seriously

Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

Gender activists in each country must fight to ensure that regulators meet this standard. If regulators are to promote trust in the media by readers, listeners and viewers, such regulators must also:

- be able to enforce sanctions when agreed upon standards are breached, and not be seen as “toothless” or biased;
- have adequate resources to fulfil their mandate;
- be applicable to and respected by all media entities within their remit (whether print and/or broadcasting, new media or advertising);
- must not only be seen to give redress, but should clearly contribute in the long term towards raising standards in the media they regulate;
- include as adjudicators respected representatives from all stakeholders, including different sectors of the public; and

- enforce widely accepted codes of ethics/standards that are regarded as legitimate by the media (owners, editors and journalists) *and* the public. The code(s) should be seen as a form of social contract between stakeholders in the media and the public and should be regularly reviewed in a transparent, open and participatory process.

The distinction between broadcasting and print media needs also to be recognised. While both subscribe to similar principles in relation to journalism, codes for broadcasting (in recognition of the fact that they are pervasive and utilise a public resource, i.e. the airwaves) need to recognise the broader role television and radio play in entertainment and include, for example, rules specifically geared to protecting children such as bans on sex or violence before certain times.

Tracking the gender record of media councils in SADC

Clearly, given the findings of the research done by organisations like GEMSA on representation of women in the media, media regulators in the South African Development Community (SADC) have not had much impact on changing the way women are portrayed in newspapers and on the airwaves. This is despite the fact that all the codes reviewed for this article contain similar anti-discrimination rules to those reflected in the IFJ code highlighted above.¹

However, given that this research is based on desktop analysis, it is difficult to determine whether the failure lies with the codes themselves, the attitudes of those on press councils, a lack of awareness about the codes, or complaint processes and/or public apathy. Thus, while the South African Press Council publishes all its decisions, none of those reviewed for this article related to breaches of its rules on discrimination based on sex or gender. This is despite the fact that the South African press code states that "...the press should not refer to a person's race...ethnicity...gender, sexual orientation or preference...in a prejudicial or pejorative context except where it is strictly relevant to the matter reported or adds significantly to readers' understanding of that matter." The website does not analyse complaints received about particular principles so it is difficult to determine whether or not there have ever been complaints about the representation of women in violation of this code.

The South Africa Press Council was in the midst of conducting a review of its processes and the code at the time of finalising this article so it was not possible to determine whether or not gender organisations had made submissions on its work or on the principles it set.

The Tanzanian Media Council, however, deserves a special mention as it has a specific gender equality code that it states must be read together with its other standards.² This gender code adopted in June 2009 sets out a number of best practices, stipulating,

for example, that the media must "give fair and equal time to men and women in their reporting" and "seek out views of all men and women in their diversity". It also specifies that men and women's voices must be heard in all areas including politics, economics and coverage of war.

The Tanzanian regulator has been established by the industry, and has a more proactive mandate than many other adjudication bodies as it is tasked not only with responding to complaints but with monitoring broad compliance by the media with standards. It publishes results of this monitoring, and in its March 2009 report included a special section on the press's track record on gender issues. The review stated that:

"Accuracy and truthfulness were observed in most gender-related stories monitored. Articles also used gender-free language.... However some articles assigned roles to females... in charge of domestic chores while men oversaw and controlled key economic interests...."

The monitoring report gives details on which papers covered the most gender related stories (noting for example that KiSwahili papers had more stories than English ones) and names and shames the "worst" performers. It also highlighted that most of the stories were urban based and that gender related stories from rural areas were mostly negative. According to the assessment just over four percent of these stories made it onto the front pages of newspapers.

Such reports measuring general "quality" of the media in relation to set criteria can only assist in

drawing the attention of the media they regulate to best practice and thus contribute towards raising standards. It is laudable therefore that the Tanzanian regulator has specifically focused on this area.

Given the scope and limitations of this paper, it is not possible to thoroughly assess the performance of Southern African regulators on reinforcing fair representation of women and men in the media against other media councils elsewhere. Such research, however, would be useful in order to ascertain what factors contribute towards such success so they could be adapted to individual country contexts. Judging however from research on representation of gender in the media elsewhere, countries in Southern Africa are not alone in failing to effectively address stereotyping and sexism in the media in line with international commitments and treaties. This concern about the lack of progress

was clearly articulated by the President of the IFJ in a speech given at a gender in media conference in 2009. He noted that “the issues that women journalists grappled with 17 years ago are pretty much the same (as) those today...(t)he three core themes – the under-valuing of women’s work, the employment penalty for mothers and the gender segregation, are still with us today as they were two decades ago.”³

Making a difference

How do we try to make sure that in ten, twenty or fifty years time our children and grand-children will not be debating these same issues and reading and writing similar critiques about unfair representation of gender in the media? Clearly gender activists need to have more proactive and creative strategies if their work in this regard is to have real impact:



New media landscape for the next generation? “I” Stories in Mauritius

Photo: Loga Virahsawmy

- There is a need for gender and media activists to engage actively in debates about media regulators to make sure that they are independent from powerful stakeholders, and do in practice hold the media accountable to principles they espouse – and ensure broad public involvement in any reviews;
- Gender and media activists need to make sure that the people chosen to adjudicate on complaints include both men and women - and put themselves forward as public representatives to sit on such panels. They must insist that the appointment procedure is open and transparent;
- Gender organisations should offer to give workshops to judges on councils to make sure that they understand the issues;
- They must lobby to ensure that codes and complaint procedures are regularly reviewed – and participate actively in these reviews;
- It is also critical to make sure that press councils commit resources to ensuring that the codes of practice they administer and the processes to complain about breaches are widely known – and if necessary to assist in this process;
- There is also a need to ensure that the procedures in place are accessible, and that it is easy to lay a complaint;
- In line with the Tanzanian example above, activists should also lobby to extend the mandate of regulatory bodies to make sure such bodies are not only passive adjudicators on complaints but also pro-actively monitor media practice and focus on representation of women in line with their principles; and
- Gender activists need to loudly and vocally lay complaints with these bodies about apparent breaches of the code and force the issue onto the agenda of newsrooms.

There are examples of good practice elsewhere that could be used in pushing for reforms to media accountability structures. For example, in the UK the Press Council after ongoing pressure has established a twenty-four hour free phone number to make it easier for members of the public to lay complaints.

There are also many examples of codes and rules that could be adapted. For example, while the standards in most Southern African countries seem to be broadly based on principles, the stylebook for the Associated Press news agency that has been cited in some best practice studies is more specific giving clearer guidance to journalists and the public. It states, for example that:

- “Women should receive the same treatment as men in all areas of coverage. Physical descriptions, sexist references, demeaning stereotypes and condescending phrases should not be used;
- Copy should not assume maleness when both sexes are involved, as in "Jackson told newsmen" or in "taxpayer...he" when it can easily be said: "Jackson told reporters" or "taxpayers...they";
- Copy should not express surprise that an attractive woman can be professionally accomplished as in: "Mary Smith doesn't look the part, but she's an authority on....";
- Copy should not gratuitously mention family relationships when there is no relevance to the subject, as in: "Gold Meir, a doughty grandmother, told the Egyptians today...."; and
- Use the same standards for men and women in deciding whether to include specific mention of personal appearance or marital and family situation.”

As can be seen from the Tanzanian example, there are also best practice examples in the SADC region that could be reinforced and replicated elsewhere. In seeking out these models, it is important to not only confine oneself to looking at press and broadcasting specific watchdogs. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in South Africa, for example, has involved gender bodies in the drafting of its codes and the organisation moreover specifies in its procedures that they can invite “experts” in a particular area to participate in hearings on issues such as racism and sexism.

Partly as a result of their consultative approach, the ASA code bars “gender stereotyping or negative gender portrayal...unless...such stereotyping or portrayal is reasonable and justifiable in an open and

democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom.” The organisation has included the following definitions in its code to ensure clarity:

- “Gender stereotyping: means advertising that portrays a person or persons of a certain gender in a manner that exploits, objectifies or demeans; and
- “Negative Gender Portrayal: means advertising that portrays a person or persons of a certain gender in a manner that restricts and entrenches the role of persons of such gender in society or sections of society.”

A Panacea for all evils?

Finally, it must be noted that codes of best practice and media councils cannot be a panacea for all evils or on their own eradicate the uneven representation of men and women in the media.

“Ethics” are also often nebulous and in relation to journalism, specific rules need to be carefully thought out to ensure they do not even inadvertently end up imposing a political correctness that compromises freedom of expression and the right to inform and be informed, therefore limiting all citizens’ meaningful participation in any society. While codes need to bar the media from reinforcing gender stereotypes, they cannot, for example, ban all use of derogatory words without potentially stopping the media from exposing and challenging sexism. Standards can reinforce the



A closer look at media in Democratic republic of Congo during Business Unusual

Photo: Loga Virahsawmy

responsibility of media to uncover the truth, but generally sanction only what is published or aired and therefore cannot on their own counter the ongoing silencing of so many voices, stories and perspectives by the media and the consequent telling of only some of the truths of any society. Ongoing advocacy and awareness raising about how telling only half the story will impact on the credibility, audience or readership figures, and therefore the bottom line, is also necessary in trying to ensure the media integrates gender perspectives into all news rather than confines coverage of these issues to Women's Day events. Training of editors, sub-editors and journalists is also necessary.

Codes cannot force journalists to hold to account governments or other powerful interests for failure to deliver on gender targets. Civil society organisations need to make sure they raise these issues consistently – and learn how to ensure that their campaigns and reports on these matters are reported in the media.

If such campaigns are to have real impact, it is important not to just accept the media status quo but to work together with lawmakers, the media and other stakeholders to ensure that mechanisms are put in place to facilitate diversity of ownership and content in the media – and access by all citizens to a range of media from different perspectives. And when these are established, activists around the region must ensure they take up opportunities to produce their own media – and tell their own stories.

Finally, the focus of those trying to transform the media cannot only be on media itself. Gender activists need to also develop and fight for the introduction of media literacy training in all schools to give audiences the tools to critically analyse what they see, hear and/or read. It is only when readers, listeners and viewers reject the way media reflects them and their societies that owners and editors of the media will be forced to question the way they report on the world.

● **Writers Bio**

Libby Lloyd is a consultant focusing on policy development in the areas of media, broadcasting and gender. She has herself been involved in media regulation and served as a Councillor on the South African Independent Communications Authority. She has also been involved among other things in public institution leadership and management and public policy development and implementation, and as a grant-maker, trainer/materials developer, researcher, radio journalist, writer and editor in the fields of gender, media and development.

Notes

- ¹ Only those codes that are easily accessible on the internet were considered.
- ² Other media regulators may also have such codes, however, these were not evident from desktop research.
- ³ Opening address, IFJ Conference: *Ethics and Gender: Equality in the newsroom*, held in Brussels, on 30-31 May 2009.