

Seeing and the Unforeseen: The Journalist as Ethicist

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REMARKS FOR PANEL ON
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I came home from work one day in mid-May 2005 to see that my copy of Newsweek had arrived in the mail.¹ Flipping through the pages I noticed the now infamous reports about the treatment of prisoners and their copies of the Koran at Guantanamo Bay. I teach the World Religions course at Eastern Nazarene College, repeatedly underscoring to my students the reverence of the Koran in Islam. I commonly repeat that the respect for the Koran is not comparable to the way many Christians treat their Bibles. Bibles are cast willy-nilly around my Protestant church and in many Protestant homes. In a church fellowship hall I once saw a wobbly table steadied by a pocket New Testament wedged beneath one leg. I've spent enough time in Muslim homes to know this would never happen with a copy of the Koran. So, when I read that this holy book had been mistreated by U. S. guards in Cuba, I suspected we might be in for a rather serious clash of cultures.

All was quiet for a few days, but then this story became front page news and the riots began in various places around the world. Newsweek came under fire for the apparent paucity and anonymity of its sources; they retracted the story, with apology. The Pentagon and the White House chastised the reporters directly, pointing blame at Newsweek for the international chaos caused by the article. For a couple of weeks, Newsweek was the great sewer of the journalistic world; they had printed a questionable story which resulted in world-wide riots and 15 deaths. In less than a month the journalists at Newsweek were apparently vindicated when independent investigations verified that these sorts of practices were common in the prison at Guantanamo Bay. Newsweek had told an important story, a story that needed telling. They had correctly reported the abuses to the Koran; the Pentagon ate crow, verifying a series of Koran-related acts that had been confirmed at Guantanamo. This story underscores what we are up to in this brief conference. *Did* Newsweek act ethically? Did these reporters act *as ethically* as they could have? Do journalists have an ethical responsibility for what happens when people read their stories? Could it ever be morally acceptable for a journalist to keep silent about atrocious violations such as these? I'd like these questions to serve as the backdrop for my reflections this morning. As a representative of Protestantism on this panel, I'll close with a confessional note about the complicity of Protestants in a skewed understanding of freedom in America.

¹ *Newsweek*, May 7, 2005.

Freedom is a problematic term. Our hearts are justifiably warmed by a host of positive connotations of the word; it is because of “freedom” that we choose our places of worship, our lunchtime meal, our activities on a March Saturday. These freedoms are limited, clearly, by certain parameters. We’re particularly discouraged, by law and social custom, from expressions of freedom which limit the liberty of others. This is a mushy and inexact standard, to be sure, but it forms the backbone of American law and social practice. Do whatever you want, just don’t get caught doing harm to others - or neglecting to pay taxes. When it comes to the pivotal questions of ethics we find ourselves quibbling over the boundaries, where it is less than clear whose freedom is to be safeguarded. It doesn’t take any real exercise of “ethics” to determine whether murder or child abuse is *wrong*. Ethics is what we do on the boundaries, the manner in which we deal with the ambiguity that lies between our actions and their influence on the other, on the world. The conference today is an exercise in boundary exploration. We find it abundantly appropriate that journalists tell the stories they witness, and unveil the corruption they discover. Still, the media wields a tremendous amount of power. A few careless words in newsprint can translate to great catastrophe on the asphalt of the world.

For some, this danger itself warrants a deep censoring of journalism. In a May 2005 radio interview for NPR’s “On the Media,” Pat Buchanan stated: “I don’t care if the item was true or false. It doesn’t make any difference. You don’t do something like this which damages a cause for which your countrymen are dying and puts at risk the boys and men we send over there.”² No mention of girls or women by the Rev. Buchanan. And in his opinion, the media should absolve itself from journalism during times of war. Buchanan’s solution gives me a bone-chilling shudder. We should, apparently, get our maritime news from the White House press secretary, who will tell us what we need to know about prisons, about interrogations, and about human rights violations, should they ever occur. Tellingly, and before any complete investigation had been made to verify or deny the Guantanamo allegations, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “It’s appalling that this story got out there.”³

On the other hand, we see that storytelling, even when true or redemptive or even *heroic*, is never completely innocent. Every story is loaded with bias, from tone to timing to emphasis to word choice to delivery, and in uncountable other ways. We fool ourselves if we think that there is another way to tell a story. Language is propaganda. Despite this ambiguity at the heart of journalism, we are in desperate need of storytellers. It is narration that binds my life to my neighbor, and family, my church, my past and my future. It is narration that makes life worth living. It is speech, language, and story which give and take life, which tell us truth and whisper lies. Intimate is the bond between ethics and storytelling. It is by “speech” that injustice comes to light, that corruption and hypocrisy are challenged. It is also by through language that people are oppressed, truth is twisted and whole nations deceived. Our question of the day, about free speech and journalism, is the paradigmatic question in ethics. How responsible are we for our speech? How much do “good intentions” count when we tell stories? Are storytellers responsible for the lives which are changed by the telling? Max Frankl, a former editor of the New York Times, claimed infamously that journalists ought to “leave reform to the reformers.”⁴ But

² Buchanan, Pat. Interview with Bob Garfield. NPR’s “On the Media,” WNYC in New York, May 20, 2005. A transcript of this broadcast is available at www.onthemedialia.org.

³ Seth Sutel, “Newsweek Retracts Story on Quran Abuse,” *The Associated Press*, May 16, 2005.

⁴ Frankel, Max, “Fix-it journalism,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 21, 1995.

Frankl's claim is naïve, for journalism is *reformation*. Storytelling is a reforming art, nouns pushed against verbs for the sake of *changing* the world that reads them. Journalism is not just fact-finding and fact-reporting; it is social reformation. To be a journalist is to be an ethicist.

In their printed responses to the Koran-flushing controversy, Newsweek reports being *surprised* by the international uproar caused by their story. This surprise should give us pause. One of the reporters who broke the story, Michael Isikoff, said of the riots, "Things turned out horribly, but it was unforeseen." I think we can agree with Isikoff that the future is in some sense unforeseeable; he had no way to anticipate everything that resulted from his story. But might he have seen *some* of the results? Shouldn't Isikoff be responsible to know at least something about the recent and distant past, ripe with examples of worldwide reaction to the mistreatment of the Koran? His was a story that warranted telling, a story that needed to be broken. But if Isikoff *had* foreseen some of the impact of his story, could he perhaps have written it differently, or pushed to see this story broken in a different way? I suspect so. Free speech may include the right-to-offend, as Charles Haynes has reminded us this morning, but this right does not obfuscate the responsibility to foresee. There is no way Isikoff could have penned his story such that it would have become completely unoffensive. But journalistic ethics includes a deep responsibility to struggle for foresight. This responsibility is not a buck that can be passed. Despite the obvious nobility of this story, perhaps the fact that Isikoff claims that the conflict was "unforeseeable" tells us that this article could have been written with a heightened sensitivity to some likely reactions.

It's notoriously easy to wag fingers at those who have failed to have foresight. In a court of law, failure-to-have-foresight is rarely good enough for conviction. I believe that Protestant Christianity has contributed mightily to the false impression that my responsibility ends at the tip of my nose; that I'm ethically obligated for only direct and primary repercussions to my words and deeds. My readings in Christian history, in the Koran, in the Talmud, etc., point to a richer level of responsibility. Good intentions are rarely enough. One must bother to know one's neighbor well enough to love and give and speak in manners that take maximal account for how such acts, gifts and words will be received. We Protestants have failed regularly to embrace this uncomfortable level of responsibility, and failed often to request it of our politicians and news reporters. If I can leave any lasting recommendation, it is that journalists must embrace their role as reformers, their duty to struggle for foresight, and the ethical injunction to craft stories which take these responsibilities into account.

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