

Speech by János Horvát
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Media, Ethic, Elections

Almost thirty years ago – as David Halberstam recalls in his remarkable work, the “Power that be...” President Johnson furiously denounced journalists for destroying and, manipulating all direct ties between party leadership and local party members and voters. As he said, the new politicians are just simply awful products of the media. This new genre of so called “modern” politicians have lost contact with their voters and supporters, and only communicate with them via forms of the media.

This situation is not necessarily the result of the wicked and manipulative desire of journalists, not even the maneuver of media moguls. Much rather it stems from the laziness of the majority of politicians for whom it is easier to visit TV-studios instead of rallies and clubs.

It is always more painless to grant interviews to unprepared journalists than face voters, and party supporters who would ask real-life questions. This phenomenon is one of the motives of the new populist trend among politicians of Europe. They want to be continuously on the screen, they want to be frequently quoted. It does not matter what they say, it only matters how many times they are present on screen and in the press. The main goal is popularity.

Since politics have become so dependent on media, the role of media workers has increased considerably, and their responsibility has become enormous since they convey messages not only for voters but also between politicians, their adversaries and even their own party people.

This dependency is even stronger in elections periods, when presence of politicians is even more intense and uncontrolled. And if we, viewers, listeners, readers, i.e. the public wants to obtain reliable information, from trustworthy sources journalist should act as honest and skilled brokers since a transparent and ethical exchange of information between media, political parties and candidates, and the electorate is a cornerstone of a democratic society. The balanced, accurate and unbiased work of journalists is essential to the democratic electoral process. It is in the interest of the civil society that they develop skills to undertake their responsibilities in a professional way.

Professional work in journalism does not only mean skilled, but also ethical behavior. I.e. it is not enough to work, write and report well, it is a must to do it on in a balanced, objective and unbiased way.

The new democracies of East-Central Europe are facing varying degrees of development. Some of them have strong democratic past while others are building on lesser traditions. In many countries past practices have left

the State media without credibility. In these countries media ethics are new, fresh notions, since they have come together with the nascence of the new societies in the early nineties.

Earlier, back in the socialist era, the sole ethical concern of a journalist might have been whether or not to be part of the system? Whether to be a journalist or quit the press? The rest of the problematic issues were regulated by the authorities. Rules, laws and, in many of the cases censorship guided the journalist. Others, high above made decision instead of them. Boundaries were more or less traced and punishment was imminent should somebody cross the line.

With freedom came responsibility. Journalists and editors themselves should decide about publications, thorny issues, and controversies. This newfound responsibility has created countless ethical concerns and issues. And for many journalists this phenomenon is new, frightening and hard to comply with.

No longer will lengthy laws regulate journalistic freedom. And the new media laws generally deal with ownership and advertising while journalistic values are no real issues in the paragraphs. That is why ethical guidelines and standards have turned out to be extremely important. Especially in countries where the market is still weak, fragile, and sensationalism is not only present but very seducing in order to create higher readership.

Sensationalism, lack of heritage and journalistic traditions are the main components of the present journalistic situation in East-Central Europe. To make an improvement on it is an almost endless hard work. Market forces alone are not potent enough to alter the situation. Education and also editorial leadership based on ethical standards is needed.

I have been a television journalist for many years. In the early nineties I had the privilege of enjoying a fellowship at Columbia University, and after returning home I gave lectures at Universities and also set up a private production company. In 1998 I became elected member of the Hungarian National Election Committee. Usually these bodies are composed of lawyers. Since its conception I was the first, and also the last non-lawyer member. It is not my job to evaluate my own contribution as a journalist to the activities of the Committee but let me quote some achievements in the 1998-2002 period. Together with the BBC World Service Training, we organized a Forum in the city of Visegrad. The result was a bilingual Voluntary Code of Ethics under the title "The Visegrad Papers". It consists of 10 chapters ranging from Editorial Independence, through to Minority Issues to the handling of Violence. The booklet was given to journalist all over the country. Though this code did not analyze election issues, but dealt extensively with objective and unbiased reporting. The annex of the booklet is the 20-point voluntary code of Hungarian Broadcast Journalists. We repeated the Visegrad Forum next year and very soon ethical issues became popular in the Hungarian press. Publishers created special ethical codes for election time. This does not necessarily mean that the Hungarian press has become ethical, but at least, the subject became known to everyone. But with the arrival of the Internet the media landscape has become even more complicated. How do we evaluate public polls on the Internet? What can we do with the party home pages in campaign moratorium? Many -many unregulated and unprecedented questions. The answers – yet again – are to be found in ethic codes.

A month before the 2002 National Parliamentary Elections, The Hungarian National Election Committee together with the Society of Hungarian Program Providers has issued an Ethical Code for Program Providers operating home pages and electronic newspapers. This code gave hints and ideas to Society members and also to

the public how to comply best with the meaning of the Hungarian Media and also Electoral Laws which do not even use or know the expression “Internet”. We believe that this Code played a pivotal role during the 2002 Elections, when no problem connected with internet was detected in the campaign period.

During the preparatory period several conferences were held in the country. On several occasion participants came not only from the journalistic fields, but election officers also attended the events. The encounter was sometimes shocking.

Journalists get their information from a variety of sources such as political parties, candidates, NGOs and, most importantly, election bodies, who are often required by law to provide relevant information. Unfortunately electoral bodies lack experience in this field. When they fail to provide this information in a complete, clear, and easily understood manner the media cannot do their job and the whole process suffers.

On the other hand journalists face difficulties understanding the electoral process since it is complex and covers many areas. If journalists want to educate voters on voting mechanics, voter participation and related issues, first they should be proficient in the many fields that relate to elections.

During our conferences it turned out, that election officials were not at all familiar with journalistic assignments, and process being this one of the motives of mutual misunderstanding. During the courses journalists have also become familiar with electoral law, procedures and techniques.

Next year we do have our first European Union Elections. Systems and rules are different from those regulating parliamentary elections. First time in modern history Hungarians will be able to cast their votes from abroad. There will not be individual constituencies but only party lists. That is why, - though my membership period is over in the National Election Committee- we now organize -together with the Hungarian Association of Journalists a new course for journalists and election officials. Lecturers would come from EU countries, from the Hungarian political scenery and media industry.

This will be a three-purpose course.

1. Build a stronger relationship between the media and electoral bodies and other sources of election related information.
2. Equip journalists with the tools needed to understand and process election-related information.
3. Encourage journalists to cover elections in an accurate, balanced, and credible manner.

Can we teach journalistic ethics? The question has frequently been raised in courses, workshops, and conferences.

Ethics are integral part of the life of human communities. Standards can be implemented from above or from outside but will not be automatically respected. They have to be accepted by large groups of a given society, journalistic communities included. Voters, journalists, politicians would interact in this process.

We have just started...