

Science & Human Dimension Project – Jesus College, Cambridge

# Ethics & The Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge

Background Documents and Proceedings  
Conference Date - 23 February, 2010

Editor: Irene Daly

# Ethics and The Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge

Tuesday, 23 February, 2010



Science and Human Dimension Project - Jesus College, Cambridge

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## Background

Since 1992 the Science and Human Dimension Project based at Jesus College, Cambridge, has been conducting conferences and publishing on how the media reports science, medicine, philosophy, religion and ethics. On Tuesday, 23 February 2010, a conference at Jesus College, Cambridge discussed a range of concerns connected with media coverage of ethics and faiths with the aim of addressing a range of concerns including:

- To what extent should ethical viewpoints of different religions, and no religion, be allowed coverage in the public space?
- How do the media give scope to different ethical viewpoints in a pluralist multi-faith and no-faith society?
- How do professionals in the media and public affairs source and keep abreast in their understanding of ethics and moral perspectives?
- Does the charge that the BBC is undermining pluralism, and thereby the integrity of the media, have any merit?
- Is education in ethics and faiths adequate in schools, and in continuing education? How can it be improved? What might be the role of a forum for the discussion of ethical dilemmas and online resources in applied ethics?

Following consultation during the planning phase a Discussion Document was drawn up providing guidance on the topics for discussion at the conference (see below). Also included in this document are the participants list, the conference agenda, and the proceedings written up by Irene Daly of Jesus College, Cambridge.

The conference also discussed the launch of a new project focused on ethics in the public space and the provision of a forum and online resources in applied ethics. This project, to be named *Ethicscope*, will work in association with the Science & Human Dimension Project.

## **Ethics & the Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge - Topics for Discussion**

### **Session One**

Doing Ethics in the Media: Discussion led by John Cornwell

A senior BBC executive commented recently that “every other story” put out on the World Service has a strong ethical perspective. The flow of such stories, he added, is unprecedented compared with former years. The reasons are many. Some point to increased awareness of human rights and regulation. Others blame the expansion of law of liability. With notable exceptions there is greater transparency in both the public and private spheres, more freedom of access to information.

Science writers and editors comment that whereas physics once had primacy in science reporting, an expanding interest from the mid 1980s in biology, medical science, and genetics focused attention increasingly on life issues. At the same time, scientists have been pushing research beyond what was thought imaginable, raising questions about our ability to apply traditional ethics and values to new moral perplexities.

How do journalists, editors, and producers source their ethical judgments? It is one thing to trace our values back to parents, education, personal history; another to define, systemise, and justify those values. Many journalists are aware of the importance of law and principles deriving from such moral heritages as Christianity, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and Kantian ethics. The exercise of moral judgments in complex moral stories, however, involves skills peculiar to journalism: the teasing out of concrete facts, attention to background, context, history, and special circumstances, before application of moral principle.

This session offers an opportunity for practising journalists to describe how they “do ethics” at short notice as well as on long term projects; to comment on the pressures, the biases, the prejudices, the constraints. We are interested in hearing journalists’ experiences and their views on the strengths and deficiencies of training, education, and everyday practice. At the same time, we are keen to hear from lawyers, ethicists, philosophers, and media educationists, on ways in which education in practical ethics might be enhanced in media courses and in-service training.

## Session Two

“Doing God” in the Media: Discussion led by Catherine Pepinster

How fair is access to the media for Britain’s faiths? How accurately is religion represented by the media? Is religious programming and press coverage commensurate with its importance in a society where the majority still profess a belief in God (even if they don’t practice)? Religious groups protest that religion is ghettoized, distorted, and routinely attacked. According to former religious producer Nigel Holmes, BBC religious output has declined by a third in a decade, while ITV’s religious programming has dropped from 110 hours a year a decade ago to “next to nothing”. BBC3, Holmes charges, features religion as a kind of “freak show”; and Channel 4’s treatment is said to be “sensationalist and critical.”

Religious leaders complain that the media routinely calls on religious representatives in order to provide an antagonist in confrontational debates. Religion, they say, is portrayed as a poor relation of politics, dominated like Westminster by ideology and personality. In the aftermath of 9/11, moreover, and the publicity given to anti-religious views of Richard Dawkins, religion is increasingly viewed as a source of danger and violence.

In a period in which the state is increasingly secular, and Britain’s pluralist society prone to interfaith tensions, should religion be constrained to the realms of individual privacy (“we don’t do God”)? Or should its potential contribution to the common good be valued and celebrated? Journalists may justifiably object that the subjective element of religious belief is inimical to factual, objective journalistic reporting; that its voice should be heard only in personal opinion, and op ed columns? Yet is it right that the spiritual and moral perspectives held by religionists should be denied a significant voice in public debates involving crucial life issues, such as abortion, assisted suicide, and human embryonic stem cell research? How can the media “do God” better?

## Session Three

Integrity and Accountability of the Media: Discussion led by Professor George Brock

In her 2002 Reith Lectures, the philosopher Onora O’Neill criticised journalists’ *‘licence to deceive’*, charging that the media is characterised by *‘reporting that smears, sneers and jeers, names, shames and blames’*. Appealing to Kantian ethics she called for a top-down, principled journalistic code of ethics. She believes that competition between media outlets gives rise to the worst forms of sensationalism: hence she held up the *New York Times* (which in theory has no competitor in its exclusivity area) as a paragon of integrity.

George Orwell, sixty years ago, saw things in a dramatically different light: for him, the integrity of the media is undermined not so much by bad individual journalists over good, or lack of adherence to codes of ethics, but precisely by the erosion of a pluralism O’Neill finds

problematic - *'the concentration of the Press in the hands of a few rich men.'* Today media monopolies involve not only the monopolies of press barons but extensive cross-media ownership as a result of deregulation. For Orwell, media monopolies, and he had BBC specifically in mind as a blatant example in the realm of broadcasting, constitute a loss of crucial checks and balances.

Generally agreed internal editorial standards, such as the separation of fact and comment, are in need of constant vigilance and encouragement. The balance between the public's right to know, and the individual's need for privacy, is a never-ending source of debate. While most professions in the UK have accepted independent regulation, media proprietors and corporations insist that self-regulation is crucial to press freedom. Yet there are powerful voices, such as O'Neill's, arguing for regulation in the interests of accountability to society. Are they right? How should such regulation be framed and by who?

#### Session Four

Online Media - Godsend or tyranny: Discussion led by Professor John Naughton

The limitless, uncontrolled, and arguably uncontrollable, information torrent that is the web has transformed the media and its possibilities, prompting optimism and pessimism in equal measure. The web breaks the monopoly of the privileged few: we can all become publishers; the marginalised and disenfranchised can be heard, power and privilege can be challenged and questioned. The democratising power of the internet is patent in the attempts of China and Iran to curb its freedoms.

Yet there are warning voices: *'Web utopianism is as deluded as Fukuyama's dreams of an end of history... the mere existence of the internet is meant to be enough to bypass the struggle for liberal constitutions and bills of rights... deluded citizens believe that the mere fact that they can blog and tweet is enough to free them from the long grinding and often dangerous tasks of political reform'* (Nick Cohen).

At the same time, the sheer volume of information is neither a guarantee of quality nor substitute for editorial selection and guidance. Against this background, the decline of newspapers marks the loss of editorial guidance built up over many years by teams with hard-won reputations for integrity and balance. The internet, for better or for worse, has the potential to alter the way we think. *"At its worst, it means shorter attention spans, shallower memories, fragmented, unsustained argument, the undermining of intellectual property rights and a tendency to mistake anecdote for fact."* (Ben Macintyre). At best, great riches of information can be accessed instantaneously that would formerly have taken weeks if not months. Interactive media has the power to create new communities and means of providing low cost education (via e-learning) anywhere in the world.

How can we encourage new generations to reap the advantages of the web, while combating its disadvantages?

### **Session Five**

Open Discussion: led by John Cornwell

In 2010-11 the Science and Human Dimension Project, with the Jesus College based Rustat Conferences, will launch a forum on Ethics and Faiths in the Public Space. This will be independent of the auspices of particular faiths or interest groups. It will draw on our many associations to date: including the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity (and its Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies), the Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy of Science, the Faraday Institute, Cambridge, the Cambridge Judge Business School, and many links with media outlets. We aim to establish an annual conference, advised by a panel drawn from a wide range of backgrounds: different faiths, philosophers, lawyers, scientists, theologians, journalists, and educationists.

The conferences should provide an opportunity for exchange of views and presentations on current ethical and faith challenges in the public space - the professions, education, the media, and politics. Through the annual conference and related publications, educational materials and workshops we aim to keep participants abreast of vital questions of the day in the sphere of practical ethics. In this final session, we welcome comments, feedback, recommendations, and pledges of involvement for such a forum.

# Ethics and the Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge

## Conference Participants

<b>John Cornwell</b>	Director, Science & Human Dimension Project, Jesus College, Cambridge
<b>Denis Alexander</b>	Director, The Faraday Institute, University of Cambridge
<b>Abd al-Bari Atwan</b>	Editor, Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper
<b>George Brock</b>	Professor of Journalism, City University, former Foreign Editor, The Times
<b>Andrew Brown</b>	Author and journalist, the Guardian, and Editor, Comment is Free: Belief
<b>Ray Bruce</b>	TV producer, film maker and writer. Head of Programmes, CTVC.
<b>Sarah Coakley</b>	Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge
<b>Nick Cohen</b>	Journalist, author, and political commentator. Columnist, The Observer
<b>Jonathan Cornwell</b>	Publisher and Director, Media Symposia
<b>Irenee Daly</b>	Rapporteur. Researcher, Centre for Family Research, Cambridge University
<b>Suzanne Franks</b>	TV producer, broadcaster, journalist, author. Senior Lecturer, Kent University
<b>Cathy Galvin</b>	Journalist, Sunday Times
<b>Bill Gent</b>	RE schools adviser and Research Fellow, Warwick University
<b>Peter Glazebrook</b>	Fellow in Law, Jesus College, Cambridge
<b>Rabbi Jeremy Gordon</b>	Rabbi, New London Synagogue
<b>Nigel Hawkes</b>	Journalist, author and Director, Straight Statistics. Former Health Editor, The Times
<b>Tom Heneghan</b>	Religions Editor, Reuters
<b>Margaret Hill</b>	Chief Adviser, Editorial Policy, BBC
<b>Rev'd Dr John Hughes</b>	Chaplain, Jesus College, Cambridge
<b>Sunny Hundal</b>	Journalist and blogger: Liberal Conspiracy and Pickledpolitics.com
<b>Ed Husain</b>	Director, Quilliam Foundation and author
<b>Rev'd Dr Tim Jenkins</b>	Dean, Jesus College, Cambridge and Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge
<b>Mohammed Khaliel</b>	Director, Islamixonline.com
<b>Prof Sir Peter Lachmann</b>	Fellow, Christ's College, Cambridge
<b>James Lefanu</b>	Doctor, journalist
<b>Julius Lipner</b>	Prof of Hinduism and the Comparative Study of Religion, University of Cambridge
<b>John Lloyd</b>	Director, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University
<b>Clifford Longley</b>	Journalist, The Tablet, The Times, BBC Moral Maze team
<b>Bob Low</b>	Managing Editor, Standpoint
<b>Stoddart Martin</b>	Publisher and author
<b>Michael McGhee</b>	Senior Fellow, Department of Philosophy, Liverpool University, and Buddhist
<b>John Milbank</b>	Professor of Religion, Politics, and Ethics, University of Nottingham
<b>Juliet Mitchell</b>	Professor of Psychoanalysis, and Fellow, Jesus College, Cambridge
<b>Martin Moore</b>	Journalist and Director, Media Standards Trust
<b>Paul Moore-Bridger</b>	Religious Studies and Ethics teacher
<b>Christine Morgan</b>	Executive Producer, BBC Religion and Ethics Radio
<b>Turi Munthe</b>	CEO, Demotix.com, journalist and author
<b>John Naughton</b>	Professor of Public Understanding of Technology, OU, and Cambridge
<b>Ashely Peatfield</b>	Editor BBC English Regions Religion and Ethics
<b>Catherine Pepinster</b>	Editor, The Tablet
<b>George Pitcher</b>	Religion Editor, the Daily Telegraph

<b>Nick Ray</b>	Architect and Fellow, Jesus College, Cambridge
<b>Clare Redfern</b>	Faraday Institute, University of Cambridge
<b>Jean Seaton</b>	Professor of Media History, University of Westminster, Historian of the BBC
<b>Lenka Setkova</b>	Director, Democracy and Civil Society Programme, Carnegie Trust UK
<b>Janet Soskice</b>	Professor of Philosophical Theology, University of Cambridge
<b>Edward Stourton</b>	Journalist, author and presenter, BBC Sunday Programme
<b>John Thompson</b>	Professor of Sociology, Fellow, Jesus College, Cambridge, and publisher
<b>Kevin Toolis</b>	Film maker, producer, director, and founder, Many Rivers Films
<b>Sharada Sugirtharajah</b>	Senior Lecturer in Hindu Studies, University of Birmingham
<b>Janice Winter</b>	Manager, Access Programme on Journalism & Democracy
<b>John Wilkins</b>	Journalist, broadcaster and former editor, The Tablet
<b>Adam Wishart</b>	Film maker and author

# Ethics and The Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge

Conference Programme - Tuesday, 23 February, 2010

Science and Human Dimension Project - Jesus College, Cambridge

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## Agenda

- 9.00-9.45**                      **Registration: Prioress's Room, Cloister Court**
- 10.00-11.00**                    **Introduction and Session 1**  
*Doing Ethics in the Media*  
Chair, John Cornwell, Director Science & Human Dimension Project
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- 11.30-12.30**                    **Session 2**  
*Doing God in the Media*  
Chair, Catherine Pepinster, Editor, The Tablet
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- 12.30-1.30**                     **Lunch   Prioress's Room, Cloister Court**
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- 1.30-2.30**                      **Session 3**  
*The Accountability and Integrity of the Media*  
Chair, George Brock, Professor of Journalism, City University
- 2.30-3.30**                      **Session 4**  
*Online Media - Godsend or Source of Tyranny?*  
Chair, John Naughton, Professor of Public Understanding of  
Technology, OU
- 
- 3.50-4.20**                      **Session 5**  
*Open Discussion - A Forum for Ethics and Faiths in the Public Space*  
Chair, John Cornwell  
Comments, feedback and suggestions of topics for further discussion
- 4.20**                              **End**

**Ethics and the Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge**

**Conference Proceedings**

**23 February, 2010**

**Editor: Irene Daly, University of Cambridge**

# Ethics and the Media in an Era of Complex Moral Challenge

## Opening Comments

**John Cornwell – Director, Science & Human Dimension Project, Jesus College**

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John Cornwell opened the conference by reflecting on how at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are increasingly faced with topics, both in science and the media, which have an ethical and moral dimension. While science in the 1980s was characterised by a preoccupation with physics and cosmology, the new millennium has thus far been the domain of the life sciences, exemplified by the sequencing of the human genome and the increased understanding of the secrets of the human mind via imaging techniques used in neuroscience.

In parallel, from a journalistic point of view, there was also a proliferation of media stories with a moral dimension, especially in the arenas of economics, politics, education and the environment, driven by an increased interest in human rights, liability, litigation and law, the advent of freedom of information and the general desire for increased transparency. In the midst of this, and echoing these changes, The Science and Human Dimension Project, based at Jesus College, Cambridge, is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. To mark this, a new project – named Ethicoscope - is to be launched with a focus on ethics in the public space. One cannot talk about ethics in the public space, he reasoned, without also including a discussion of religion. However, at the interface of these moral problems, lie the media, the conduit through which these matters are received by the consumer. Today's conference would be a first step in defining and acknowledging these topics.

## Session 1: Doing Ethics in the Media

Chair: John Cornwell – Director, Science & Human Dimension Project

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The Chair started proceedings by asking the following questions of those assembled. How do you deal with tricky ethical questions in your everyday journalistic lives? As journalists do you have a moral map? What are the pressures? How do you cope? How does journalism do its job? At the same time, the chair invited the non-journalists assembled to comment on how they thought journalism does its job and to think about how their discipline could inform journalism.

Cornwell began by outlining a recently encountered ethical dilemma. He was commissioned to write a feature about a scientist who hoped to prove that SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors, a class of anti-depressant, the most common being Prozac) work, not by means of any chemical reactions, but by the placebo effect. Through a meta-analytic study, this scientist concluded that SSRIs were indeed no better than a placebo. After interviewing clinicians and scientists in the field, Cornwell felt that this scientist did have an interesting case to make. It was immediately apparent however, that there were ethical consequences in printing such a story. The fact that many people find relief from their depression as a result of taking SSRIs is not in question. However, if you were to tell people suffering from depression, that their medication doesn't work the way they think it works, you run the risk that they may stop taking their medication. However, there is also much research to suggest that suicidal ideation increases when people stop taking this type of medication at short notice, and that their depression can get worse in the longer-term. Cornwell was conflicted as he acknowledged the potential harm printing such a story could cause.

A second issue also existed. This story was commissioned at the same time that Simon Singh, the well know science writer, was being sued for libel for his criticism of the chiropractic industry. It was therefore, a bleak and uncertain time to be writing about science, especially from a critical standpoint. He was also mindful of the often-misleading headlines that accompany stories, written not by the journalist, but by a sub-editor. While his editor listened to his concerns, the decision was made not to run the story, not because of the headlines but because it was not considered "hard enough". There are, he suggests two ways to look at this. Firstly, a story has to be cast iron if publishing it can put people at risk. Secondly, and more dubiously, is the increased tendency of journalists to make such a story "hard", where the hardness does not really exist, in order to get published. As a means of illustrating this, Cornwell reflected on his experience of working for a Murdoch publication

during which time a memorandum was circulated instructing journalists to remove from their copy “all conditional verbs...as conditionals were the language of a dying newspaper”. In finishing his introduction Cornwell suggested the media’s ability to contribute both to “human flourishing” (and its opposite) exists precisely because of its ability to report all of the facts of a story, to tease out the context. Ethics and morality count for nothing without having one’s facts straight.

First to respond was the science writer Nigel Hawkes, who gave a historical account of the changing nature of science journalism. The 1960s he reminisced was a time of “great technological optimism”, in which science was seen as a force only for good. He recognised the whole zeitgeist has now changed. A change he dated to the late ‘60s when a series of publications began to query the morality of past scientific achievements such as the Manhattan project. A period of self-reflection within the scientific community ensued, the end result of which was a reframing of science. Journalists, he maintained, are powerfully influenced by how issues are framed, and write their stories to fit the particular frame. As a result science quickly became both a “peril and a hope” within science journalism. He admitted that one only had to look for a controversial subject and write about it from a moral dimension, to get published. More recently, he felt the opposite is happening. Citing the coverage of stem cell research, Hawkes suggested there is too much moralising and not enough explanation of the actual science.

Hawkes also pointed to a second historical artefact that has led to the increased ethical and moral dimension in science writing. The way in which chemistry has “taken over” biology, i.e. the rise of molecular biology, which he argued is a Kuhnian paradigm shift. Stories that result from such scientific revolutions have always been of keen interest to journalists. In the ‘50s it was plate tectonics, but this did not have a moral component, the next was the genetic code, which very much has a moral dimension. And so journalists shifted from writing about physics and chemistry to writing about biology and genetics, whose moral dimension could not be escaped. However Hawkes charged science writers as approaching the ethical and moral aspects of the developments with a “cut and paste” attitude. In other words, taking the opinions from other areas, particularly environmentalism, critics of science and second-hand from theologians, and applying them to debates in biology and genetics. He cited *The Warnock Report*, (published in 1984 to develop principles for the regulation of IVF and embryology, and chaired by the Utilitarian philosopher Mary Warnock), as being especially influential in setting the tone. To return to Cornwell’s original question, Hawkes believed that much of science reporting is done with a “stick on morality” i.e. that rather than write about these issues based on any personal moral and ethical reflection, journalists wrote from the position that would get them the most attention. This was typical of science writers and remains so today as one *still* only has to find the ethical angle, and play it up to get published.

James Lefanu of the *Daily Telegraph* argued that journalists are mere stooges for more powerful forces, citing Nick Davies' 2008 publication *Flat Earth News* as a powerful illustration of this view. In this instance journalists are mere ciphers for the opinions of others, especially the scientists and departments who wish to promote their own work and agendas, namely that they are more likely to get grants if their work is considered to be high profile.

Lefanu went on to describe what he saw as a recurring theme in science; the false antithesis imposed by science between progress and reaction. The process starts when scientists make extravagant claims about what it's possible to achieve via a certain technology. In the '80s, the secrets to curing illnesses were said to be discoverable via research on the human embryo; in the '90s it was Dolly the sheep (cloning); and in '00s it has been stem cells. However, while scientists are engaged in the process of discovery, they are less engaged in the questions relating to the moral and ethical benefits of these discoveries. Lefanu claimed that scientists leave it to others to answer the question, "just because we can do something, does that mean we should do it?" This Lefanu suggested results in the false antithesis between the progression of science (as scientists see themselves as trying to make the world a better place), and religion which is seen as hostile to this progress for asking questions of morality. This theme he argued recycles every ten years and has a powerful overall effect. He felt his obligation as a science writer is to challenge this scientific faith, and the notion that there is a lack of consequences, and to insist on that sceptical view.

Julius Lipner, Professor of Comparative Religion in Cambridge, asked if journalists should be involved in doing ethics and if so, whose ethics? He queried whether, for example, when a journalist is reporting about an event in India, or on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in the UK, there should be an ethical meta-narrative used to frame the story. And if so, what sort of ethics should the journalist use? He felt it is too easy for a journalist to say they are just reporting the facts, as one only has to read two different newspapers reporting of the same story to know that this is not true - how stories are reported has tremendous consequential effects. In response to this *Reuters* Religions Editor, Tom Heneghan, outlined how this precise issue has on occasion challenged his team, specifically with reference to using descriptive terms that might be considered pejorative. He used the Iranian Council of Resistance as an example. This is an exile group based in Paris that has some cult-like attributes. In 2003 the French police raided their headquarters and detained their leader, a woman who seems to have a goddess-like status within the group. In protest members set themselves alight. *Reuters* asked themselves, when is self-immolation considered a heroic act of protest, and when is it excessive behaviour? They discussed this at length, deciding that such behaviour was unwarranted in the case of a detainment. They also argued that to use the word 'cult' was the only way they could explain the extreme response of the group. He pointed that when one is faced with an ethical dilemma such as this, one has to go

through this type of process, and although time consuming, it is the only way to tell the story in a balanced way.

Following on, Abd al-Bari Atwan, editor of *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* suggested that Western media has still not found its ethics and that this is the reason it is currently losing ground to alternative media. He contended that mainstream media has lost the moral test, especially in the Middle East. In response to Lipner's original question: 'what sort of ethics should journalists advocate?', he argued that international, eastern, Christian and Muslim ethics should all at least be considered, whereas currently only western ethics are considered. He characterised the Middle East as being the 'guinea pig' for all Western military, media and ethical experiments. He argued that for ethics to be ethical one must side with the oppressed, the people who are suffering. This he felt should be the mainstream interpretation of ethics. Currently in Gaza there is no medicine, no food, 600,000 houses have been destroyed. He felt that western media for the most part have been silent on this issue and he questioned whether they could call themselves ethical for doing so. He pointed out that when Middle Eastern journalists argued that the Iraq war would turn the country into a failed state, they were branded militants and radicals, rather than being considered as having special insight. Again related to the wars in the Middle East, he argued that in the era of *embedded journalism*, war reporting can no longer be considered free and unbiased. The contracts that one has to sign in order to become embedded with the American or British armed forces put journalists under immense pressure to report these stories from a particular standpoint. He argued that we should all find this development to be ethically vexing.

Professor Sir Peter Lachmann returned the discussion to science with reference to Lewis Wolpert who said that "ethical issues arise only when science is applied to technology." Following on from the points made by Lefanu, he reminded us "that nothing is too dangerous to know, but that there are many things that are too dangerous to do". He argued that until recently it was only the medieval church that had ever argued that there were things too dangerous to know. However, this type of thinking had resurfaced in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent foundation of the Department of Homeland Security in the United States. Recently Lachmann found himself having to publicly defend an American colleague whose work on the variola (smallpox) virus was considered "too dangerous to know" because of its potential application to bioterrorism. Therefore, reflecting on the earlier example of the human genome project, it is not the research itself, he reasoned, but its application that has ethical implications. Lachmann's second point brought the relationship between scientists and journalism full circle. He pointed out that public policy decision making, particularly in medicine, is no longer driven by any risk/cost benefit analysis, but rather by both the fear of litigation and evisceration in the media. A case in point is the ceasing of production of fractionated plasma products in 1998-99 in the UK. This was done in order to limit the potential for transmission of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) via blood and blood

products. Buying in these blood plasma products now costs the NHS an estimated £100 million a year. Lachmann said that the Chief Medical Officer had made this decision because of the way in which the story of someone contracting CJD from blood products would likely be played out in the media. This is made all the worse, Lachmann pointed out, as there has only been one case of a person contracting CJD via fractionated blood plasma, and this was before newer blood screening measures were introduced. So despite the argument that such decisions shouldn't be made by any one individual, journalists need to aware that there is a real public cost from the way they tell their stories and create scapegoats.

John Naughton of *The Observer*, took a different view, and proposed that the idea of ethics and journalism is preposterous, not because he doesn't believe in ethics, but that ethical considerations are appropriate only to the professions. Journalism, he claimed, is not a profession but a "grizzly trade which rides on the back of a fiercely competitive and often corrupt business". Touching again on a point made by Lefanu, he insisted that to think that the "foot soldiers" i.e. the ordinary journalists, have ethical choices, that they have an impact is "laudable but futile". As an example he reflected on how in 1983 *The Observer* newspaper came under the ownership of Tiny Rowland and his conglomerate Lonrho with its many interests in Africa. As a result *The Observer* went through a period in which its coverage of African issues could not be believed. Naughton cited this time as being an example of how the ethics and morality of individual journalists did not have any impact or bearing, because the commercial owners were setting the agenda. A second and more recent example came from the coverage of the cervical cancer debate as it was handled by both *The Daily Mail* and the *Irish Daily Mail* in Ireland. In the UK the decision was made that it would be funded by the state; this was not the case in Ireland. Interestingly the British *Daily Mail* campaigned that the government should not be forcing young women to be vaccinated, whereas in Ireland the same paper campaigned to have government to pay for all young women to receive the vaccine. Again, this demonstrated that the individual ethics of a journalist has no impact.

Broadcaster Dr Suzanne Franks wished to highlight the different pressures in television news. These are pressures of simplicity, to present stories in black and white terms with no complexity and no shades of grey. One has to fight to be allowed to demonstrate the complexities of an issue, she insisted. For example, when she started as a producer in the 1970s she covered an industrial dispute in the midlands. Having interviewed the union and management representatives, it was apparent that there was not that much difference between the two. However, the lack of conflict between the two sides displeased her editor and her report was edited to make "better television". Therefore, Franks advocated an ethics of complexity - to be allowed to tell the whole story. Margaret Hill, Chief Adviser Editorial Policy at the BBC, added the need to consider having ethical and moral rules over what we do and also how we behave. She stated that in the BBC there is a sense of needing to demonstrate tremendously ethical behaviour in how one conducts oneself. However, they are

unable to take an ethical stand about moral issues because they have to be seen to be neutral. Therefore, she queried if it is possible to take an ethical stance on something without losing impartiality. Using *Fox News* as an example, she stated that based on the way they behave (they are not impartial) they are unethical, and yet they have a very specific moral stance. She suggested that maybe a Catholic newspaper could take a moral stand, but you can't do this in the BBC. The BBC historian Jean Seaton maintained that journalism should be an amoral activity, and so suggested in response to Abd al-Bari Atwan's plea for journalist to be more ethical in the reporting of the conflict in Gaza, that they don't need to be more ethical, they just needed to report better. The final comments of the session came from John Lloyd of the *Oxford Reuters Institute* who agreed with Seaton in needing to be amoral, but also argued that journalists have a work-a-day ethic, of checking facts, and independent verification, often in difficult circumstances, such as having editors with an agenda, but that it does exist. Lloyd requested the conference remember that on an almost daily basis, journalists reveal something that was previously hidden from society - the recent parliamentary expenses scandal is a perfect illustration of this. Therefore, to say that we live in a moral swamp from which we cannot emerge, as Naughton implied, is just not true.

## Session 2: Doing God in the Media

Chair: Catherine Pepinster - Editor, The Tablet

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Pepinster started the session by asking the delegates to consider the type of coverage religion currently gets in the media. She highlighted that religious stories are predominantly about rows, splits, allegiances, popularity and scandals, but very rarely about belief. This should be a familiar approach she argued, as it is akin to the way in which politics is reported, personality rather than policy, and in the case of religion, prayers rather than theology. In the age of the tabloid, this is not surprising, as stories that are superficial and exciting sell, but this does not make them important. Pepinster bemoaned the often facile reporting of religion, which is treated as “almost an anthropological curiosity”, as if people with beliefs are eccentric and intriguing. At worst the media is hostile, viewing religion as the province of bigots.

She suggested six major factors that have shaped the way that religion is currently reported. Undoubtedly 9/11 has caused renewed interest and fear of religion, especially Islam. The aggressive atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, who have encouraged the idea that religion is bad and dangerous and argue that faith has no place in society. Celebrity culture, which has already impacted on politics, is beginning to rub off on the reporting of religion, and so, people are now more interested in who Rowan Williams is arguing with rather than what he thinks. The obsession with sex means that morality is now considered to be about sex. Religion equals morality in many people's minds and therefore morality and religion mean sex. As a result, religion is now seen as a private issue and yet commentators object to the role of religion in private life. Morality of course she argued is not just about sex, it is just as much to do with the eradication of poverty, or the treatment of migrants, but this aspect of religion is put to one side. The press, she felt, offers little exposition of beliefs, probably because they are ignorant of it. Pepinster, while sympathetic to the pressures journalists face and recognising that the landscape of 24 hour news drives the desire for stories filled with drama, personality and change, reminded us that change in faith is not something that happens over night - the Vatican for example “thinks in centuries.”

Pepinster's second substantive point was the lack of religious coverage in the media, especially on television. According to religious producer Nigel Holmes, the BBC's religious content has declined by one-third in a decade, while ITV's output has dropped from 110 hours a year to next to nothing. She again cited Holmes who claimed that BBC3 sees religion as a “kind of freak show” while Channel4's coverage is both sensational and critical. Newspapers are different: *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* all have religious blogs attached

to their websites that are hugely popular. This popularity demonstrates an appetite amongst the public for religious content. While editors may have been surprised by the success of these blogs it is important not to forget that for millions of ordinary Britons, faith remains very important, especially so in migrant communities.

Pepinster recognised that we live in a society where we are being faced with an increasing number of ethical decisions. Often these are beginning and end of life issues. Some, she said, argue that religion has no place in these debates, but she suggested that if faith plays a part in so many people's lives, then why should the codes by which they live be ignored? Why should the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has shaped our legal history, not have something to offer in these debates? Furthermore, wouldn't our lawmakers, policy makers and scientists shape their ideas better if they had faced argument and counter-argument with people who have distinct ideas about right and wrong?

Finally, Pepinster believed that while healthy scepticism in the press towards religion is to be welcomed, recently this scepticism has been replaced by cynicism. In sharp contrast, science and medicine is treated with reverence. Looking at the MMR vaccine debacle she stated that we can clearly see that science needs to be challenged as much as religion. While Britain is increasingly, multicultural, multi-faith, multifaceted and secular, it is in danger of becoming secularist, where faith is something to be tolerated as a private interest only. This would continue unless the media increases its coverage of religious issues. However, the media also needed to be more responsible in its reporting of religion, by not always taking the easy route of presenting religion in terms of dramatic clashes between opposing world views.

Edward Stourton of the BBC disagreed with some of Pepinster's points, in that he felt that when it comes to news coverage, journalists are not obliged to cherish religion or religious stories any more than they do political ones. There is however a duty to interpret the world for listeners and viewers, which you cannot do unless you understand religion properly. He claimed that one of the problems with contemporary British media is its religious ignorance. As a result we get things wrong. Returning to Gaza as an example, journalists could not comprehend that a religiously driven organization such as Hamas could be so popular with the result that British media got their election success wrong. This is evidence of ignorance rather than scepticism.

Mohammad Khaliel, Director of Islamix.com, followed on from this by outlining details of a programme he is involved with, "*Do a day at a Mosque*". This gives non-Muslims the opportunity to learn about Islam, and based on this experience, as well as from collaborating with the BBC, Kahliel believed that it is not just religion that people don't understand, but the difference between religion and culture - in other words, that the same religion may be practised differently in different countries/cultures. Kahliel questioned Pepinster's account that

coverage of religion has decreased, by saying she hadn't taken into account alternative and specialised media, which he claimed has erupted. He speculated that this alternative media has flourished because Muslims for example, do not see western coverage of Middle-Eastern issues as being fair and balanced. He also pointed to the increased interest in religions, especially Islam in the wake of 9/11. Librarians had commented on how many more books were being discharged from the Islam section, and there has also been an increase in white middle class conversions to Islam.

Professor Janice Soskice, the Cambridge University theologian, returned to Pepinster's point about the invasion of a celebrity culture in religious reporting. Soskice bemoaned the trend for adversary. She outlined how she is often contacted by a media researcher asking the question, "Can miracles happen?" When she replies "yes" and outlines how so from a theological perspective, the researcher is, more often than not, disappointed and finds two alternative adversarial sources that will go at it hammer and tongs in answering the query on air. She argued on behalf of the public, that people are not interested in hearing about topics from such an adversarial perspective, and that journalists need to stop thinking of good stories as only being about ones with conflict.

Christine Morgan, Executive Producer BBC Ethics and Religion Radio, recognised the points made by Soskice, and reflected that when she started in the BBC in 1987 religious coverage was predominantly Christian. But the publication of the *Satanic Verses*, and the *fatwā* it sparked against Salman Rushdie, changed all this. Issues the BBC has had to overcome in its switch to multi-faith coverage, has been to do with choice of language and issues of representation. One of the continuing issues she faces is the atheist/belief debate, which she thinks has become rabid and entrenched. Recently, BBC Radio 4 ran a series called "The Atheist and the Bishop" in which an atheist and a bishop come together to apply their own philosophies to the experiences of people they meet. This was an attempt to give a more even-tempered, pragmatic voice to this debate. She agreed with Pepinster that there is a public appetite for religious programming which doesn't share journalists' cynicism, citing programmes such as Radio 4's '*Beyond Belief*' which, according to Morgan, have the highest audience appreciation figures.

Abd al-Bari Atwan stated that it is increasingly difficult being a Muslim in the UK, not just because of 9/11 and the assumption by the public that all Muslims are terrorists, but also because the media reinforce this stereotype. For example, after the Twin Tower bombing, he was inundated with requests to do stories with about Muslim communities in London, but it became apparent that they were only interested in talking to radicals such as Abu Hamza al-Masri and Omar Bakri. Despite arguing that these people were not representative of the Muslim community, the journalists insisted on focusing on them. Returning to Morgan's point about issues of representation, he pointed out that when the British media turn to a Muslim

spokesperson for commentary on an issue, they choose men who are unshaven, ugly, dirty, inarticulate and always very radical. This again reinforces the negative stereotypes of Muslims in Britain.

John Wilkins, former editor of *The Tablet*, returned the discussion to the hostility that is expressed towards religion. He stated that respectful interviewing is no longer possible due to the contempt with which those with religious beliefs are held by the atheist community. As evidence he turned to a recent Channel 4 series about the Bible hosted by Ann Widdecombe. In an episode, focusing on the Ten Commandments, Widdecombe interviewed Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry. Fry, said Wilkins, was “amazingly abusive”, while Hitchens just ‘walked out’. This contempt at the academic level, he suggested, has influenced editors into thinking religion is a dangerous topic to cover.

Professor John Milbank suggested that in the past, politeness characterised the atheist/belief debates because nobody really cared about it, but now everybody does. Milbank suggested that there is currently a spiritual vacuum due to the failure of secular ideologies, and paradoxically this has resulted in religion slowly creeping back into public and political life. He argued that this is an important and very recent phenomenon, occurring not just in the UK but Italy and France too. He disagreed with Wilkins’ characterisation of Hitchens and Fry as ‘academics’, and felt strongly that not all academics are proponents of Dawkins. He proposed that religion is well represented in academia, especially so in France. But like Soskice, he advocated a better mode of interaction between academics and the media.

The most problematic issue for Milbank was the way all religions are merged together: so that when the church argues that religion (in general) is not the cause of violence, people don’t believe them. The public see a connection between Islam and violence, and because religion is talked about in general terms, he felt that Christians were also tarnished. He advised that we need to recognise that Islamic and Christian history are different; and unless we do so, we will not be able to get to a serious treatment of the current issues.

Bill Gent, a schools advisor on Religious Education (R.E.), addressed “ignorance of religion”. He said that in many schools R.E. is tremendously valued, with over half-a-million students every year taking the GCSE (national school exams for 16 year-olds) short course on RE. However, religion is now being taught in the same manner it is being reported. In a recent study commissioned by the Department of Children, Families and Schools (DCFS) looking at how world religions is taught, it was found that there almost myopic focus on adrenaline fuelled issues, and little about actual beliefs. While this makes the R.E. programme sexy and fast moving, there is less focus on the understanding of religion itself, and so a generation of young people are being taught to think about religion as a series of contentious issues.

Andrew Brown, editor of *Comment is Free - Belief* (*The Guardian's* religion blog), discussed how his site gets “absolutely swamped with hatred for what is known as the religious” and agreed with Wilkins regarding the contempt that non-believers have for believers. The existence of ‘the religious’ is a modern mythical construct, as it doesn’t correspond to any instance of actual religious people or their religious beliefs. It is instead a dark-shadow side of irrationality, descended from 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant anti-Catholic propaganda. This hatred for the religious, he argued is itself a quasi-religious phenomenon of which Dawkins is an interesting example but not a driver. Brown called it a “quasi-religious phenomenon”, as it has something in common with the religions it so loathes, which is the extraordinary amounts of hatred and heresy involved, with an even greater hatred for atheists who concede they might be wrong. This is making the discussion of religion all night impossible, he lamented.

In agreement with this, Sharada Sugirtharajah, lecturer at the University of Birmingham, claimed that the moderate voices in UK religions are not being heard. From the Hindu perspective she was in agreement with the earlier distinction made between religion and culture, outlining this is not just a Muslim issue. Citing honour killings and arranged marriages she outlined that that the British public seem to think that these are somehow sanctioned by Indian culture. In contrast nobody suggests that Irish culture sanctions the sexual abuse of children.

The Irish reference was continued in the final comment of the session in which John Naughton pointed out that the reports of the Ryan and Murphy inquiries into the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests in Ireland, originally only came to light because of journalistic inquiries, and so journalistic suspicion of clerical institutions is indeed sometimes warranted and to be welcomed.

### Session 3: The Accountability and Integrity of the Media

Chair: Professor George Brock - Head of School of Journalism, City University

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Professor Brock began with two points that connected his talk with the previous sessions. If those assembled had any reason to dislike the way that contemporary mainstream media operates, it would be worthwhile remembering that the media as we know it is in fact a slowly disintegrating institution. In the coming decade it would more possible for those gathered to influence new formulations, rules and arrangements in a way that has not been possible in a century and a half. Brock then spoke in favour of adversarialism: he contended that it is too easy to make fun of adversarialism, simplification, distillation, editing and brevity when they are done badly, but such characteristics are unavoidable when one is dealing with mass communications reaching large audiences. He reminded us that if journalists only told the truth i.e. the facts of a story it would still not be without consequence. And so, while those in the media should be encouraged to consider the consequences of what they do, it is also true that telling the truth can be “catalytic with unpredictable consequences”. It is not therefore possible to know all the consequences of telling a truth, nor what people will do with a truth.

Brock considered the morning session to have been about the quality of behaviour, both individual and organisational. Now our attention should be focused on the relationship between society, media and accountability and on what should govern this relationship. Brock took as a starting point what he hoped was a shared assumption, that news media should be free of undeclared interest and the constraints upon it should be kept to a minimum. And secondly, that some form of accountability for error is important. In the UK this currently exists in the form of a mixed economy between legal constraints on newspapers, then tighter constraints on broadcasters (especially the BBC), and then some looser constraints on the print media in the form of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC). Starting from this position, how can balance be best achieved between the two? A current belief particularly among the political elite is that the balance between independence and accountability is out of kilter. The controversy over the MMR vaccine, a watershed for all journalism, demonstrates this point: the story was carried and discussed right across the media spectrum and everybody got some aspect of this story wrong. Moreover, it had a measurably bad outcome - most of which is yet to come. This therefore begs the question: if you want better systems of accountability, are you trying to prevent the worst kind of errors or, are you trying to produce perfectibility? Brock felt that discussion about these issues in the press as the desire to micromanage perfectibility, which he suggested puts the balance in the wrong place. Of course, new technologies will change all form of communication, as well as changing the

nature of the public sphere. New technology will also have a big effect on reliability and accuracy as they become more difficult to identify but almost more important to ensure. Assessing accuracy will always be possible as long as consumers are able to access the evidence on which a story is based.

In returning to the idea of balance between accountability and independence, he stressed that the public now believed that the media had not just a licence to be wrong but also to deceive, (not in the sense of invention but by being oblique). Brock warned us that to regain the balance, (and that there was a strong case to do so), a number of issues would need to be addressed. In some instances for example, a better journalistic culture needed to be encouraged. In general the media needed to be more transparent. The PCC would need to change its structure away from the dominant majority of members being journalists and editors. Finally Brock admitted to having changed his mind on privacy laws; he argued that self-regulation was not working, and that something else was needed. In the interim judge-made law specific to privacy had developed so rapidly that it would be better to have a coherently written law with checks and balances. However, if these changes were to be implemented he cautioned that some things would remain unchanged: the media would remain unlikeable / unlovable, it would continue to be competitive, it would not address issues of time and space, nor would it do anything to ownership. Furthermore, he concluded that you cannot regulate a climate of opinion, as might be favourable to the reporting of religion, but sometimes the truth is hard to digest and this included truths about religion.

John Lloyd, of the *Reuters Institute* at the University of Oxford, commented that the media should never be lovable and nor should it aspire to be so. He reflected that much of what the media does is about conflict and questioned whether one can differentiate between conflict and serious debate. He pointed out that many of the stories about religion, homosexuality in the church, women bishops, terrorism, are 'conflictual' because they are the core issues that face the religious at this time. He reminded us that conflict is not always for conflict's sake, but often it reminds us about serious issues.

Abd al-Bari Atwan, editor of *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper, then queried why the British media did not follow the lead of both the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, both of which published front page apologies acknowledging that they got the matter of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in Iraq wrong, and considered it their duty to apologise. He asked Brock why the British media was not willing to be as accountable as their American equivalents or was accountability just a 'magic word'?

Cathy Galvin, Deputy Editor of the *Sunday Times Magazine*, wished to return to the idea of unanticipated consequences of truth telling. She agreed strongly with this sentiment stating that journalists work in a business where there are no certainties, and in a world that has no

certainties. Galvin revealed herself to have been the commissioning editor of Cornwell's SSRI story. She outlined the "soul searching" that was done in the context of that piece, but that in general all journalistic activities have an ethical dimension and like consequences, it is not something that can be escaped from. A very good illustration of this Galvin suggested was *The Sunday Times* interview with James Watson (of Watson and Crick fame) conducted by one of his mentees, then a fledgling journalist. The interview was explosive as Watson, without provocation, spoke about people of African descent as being of inferior intelligence. *The Sunday Times* magazine ran the article, but didn't then run a news story about these comments, which others did. This became an international story and resulted in Watson's retirement from his position at Cold Spring Harbour. Watson had not been entrapped into making these comments and, Galvin maintained, sometimes you have to accept that as a journalist you will upset people. These were Watson's thoughts, as distasteful as they were, but the newspaper was 'right to run the story'.

Milbank defended Soskice's disappointment at the constant adversarialism in the press and TV. He outlined that in the case of religious reporting the real bone of contention is that the same core conflict i.e. liberal versus conservative values, is being played out over and over again, applied each time to different issues. Because of this, stories that don't fit the mould are ignored. He claimed it was an insult to people's intelligence to think that they can't grasp more than two sides to a story, yet two sides is mostly all that is provided. He explained that one of the most controversial issues in the Church of England at the moment was not gay vicars, or women bishops, but the future of the parish. Rowan Williams supports the idea of *Fresh Expressions* which allows people to 'do church' in places other than churches. Milbank insisted that this was "systematically undermining the parish structures of this country." There is currently an argument between the supporters of this new movement and people who believed in traditional parish life. He argued that this would have huge implications for the social structure of Britain. He believed it would also influence whether the Church of England goes all the way into becoming a dissenting Protestantism or remains in the prayer book tradition and therefore, in the long run, the Catholic tradition. This issue is not divided along liberal and conservative lines, but between a new generation of evangelicals on the one hand, and Anglo-Catholics on the other. This, he concluded, made it harder for the media to understand, and therefore the story goes unreported, despite its importance.

Martin Moore, Director of the Media Standards Trust, pointed out that the mechanisms of accountability have changed enormously. The very fact that ordinary readers can now contact and engage in debate with individual journalists via the internet has dramatically changed the landscape. What it means to be in the media has also changed as everyone and anyone can publish and express themselves. He outlined that the reporting of science has changed in the last decade for the very reasons discussed earlier in relation to religion: overcoming ignorance of the issues, access to specialists in a subject, and problems of speed. The

Science Media Centre was set up to address some of these structural problems that were seen to be resulting in bad and inaccurate reporting of science stories. It had been felt that debates were taking place about issues such as CJD, MMR and GM, in the media without the participation of scientists. The chimera debate illustrates this: the press was describing these advances as a future filled with humans with cows' heads. Sensationalising the story was affecting the way in which politicians were thinking about legislating the area. Scientists were clearly displeased and so The Science Media Centre stepped in and facilitated a discussion between the media and the scientists. As a result coverage in the media changed significantly, and went on to have a material effect on the legislation that was finally and unexpectedly passed.

Returning to the question of WMDs in Iraq, Bob Low of *Standpoint* magazine objected to Abd al-Bari Atwan's assertion that the British media all had the same view regarding the war in Iraq. He asserted that very many newspapers in this country both broadsheet and tabloid were against the war. It was also equally wrong to suggest that either the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* represent all of American media. He further argued that newspapers are under no obligation to print such front-page apologies, and queried if the coverage of the war was as impartial in the Middle East as it was in many sources in the west?

Pepinster developed the points made on and accountability, by making it clear that there are other professions involved in the process, namely PR, advertising and marketing, both thus far ignored in the discussion. These professions, she said lacked, integrity and accountability. Therefore, if we are talking about limiting what journalists do, in order to have more integrity/accountability, it will also be necessary to discuss how to expand the powers into these professions too.

Documentary maker Adam Wishart wished to take the opportunity to praise conflict. He described how the issues he is interested in are conflicts regarding important issues such as resource allocation and public policy. This related to vital elements about how society manages itself and the idea that these issues shouldn't be reported because they are characterised by conflict is, he felt, an abdication of his responsibility to tell the truth. In an attempt to bring balance to the debate he reminded the conference that working for the BBC means he is already regulated. He is unable to make a documentary without being reminded of ethics and accountability. But the debate so far has not focused on the organisations already looking after these matters and acting with integrity. There is, he conceded, a difficulty in finding balance when reporting science and medical stories. For example should climate sceptics be given as much coverage as the majority scientific view? This was also the problem with the MMR debate, as it was felt that Andrew Wakefield should be given the same level of authority as the rest of the scientific community. This need to be balanced is making science reporting more difficult.

Margaret Hill, BBC Chief Adviser on Editorial Policy, said that while balance and editorial policy is certainly something the BBC has to take seriously because of its Charter, impartiality doesn't have to be a see-saw effect. Hill described how you could have conflict and disagreement, but it doesn't always have to be one side against the other. For example, you could have two members of a political party who disagree about a policy, and so despite the fact there is conflict, they are still discussing the policy rather than usual Labour v Conservative agenda. She described it as being a question of shifting impartiality around the circumference and not always thinking of it as one side against the other. And so, she contended, it is imperative that we really look at this sense of balance in a wider context than just Labour/Tory, Conservative/Liberal. All it takes is to be a little bit more sophisticated in how we do it.

John Cornwell turned the discussion to the pluralism of the press as parts of the checks and balances and cited two occurrences to illustrate his point. In the late 1970s Cornwell travelled with the then editor of the *Observer*, Conor Cruise O'Brien, to Athens to cover a debate between Seán MacBride and Amadou-Mahtar M'bow. M'bow was at the time Director General of UNESCO and McBride was the author of a UNESCO report "Many Voices One World". This report was commissioned to consider the fundamental issues of imbalances in global communication and its findings accused the western media of being completely corrupted because they treated information as a commodity. Cornwell remembered that Cruise O'Brien had made an interesting point in the debate between himself and McBride that one had to look behind the power in the media. O'Brien was working from a western model of free enterprise where the power resided with individual purchasers of newspapers or books to decide whether or not to buy the newspaper or book.

Cornwell also reflected on Baroness Onora O'Neill's 2002 BBC Reith Lectures. Her final lecture "Licence to Deceive" was on the integrity of journalism. She took the position that it was the competition within the media that provoked sensationalism. She held up The New York Times as the paragon of journalism in the world, which Cornwell conceded in terms of exclusivity - it has no competition. However, what worried Cornwell was that in the same week O'Neill gave her Reith Lecture, Tony Blair was negotiating media deals with Rupert Murdoch in Downing Street. Cornwell's questions to Brock were "who is right about this?" Does the pluralism of the media such as it still exists, provide checks and balances that are really valuable or does it provoke mere sensationalism? Or, are we now moving into a position which horrified George Orwell 60 years ago when he said it is not journalists being good or bad that we have to worry about but the concentration of the media into fewer and fewer hands? It seemed to Cornwell that, with the exception of digital, we are moving inextricably towards Orwell's nightmare.

Brock replied saying that Cornwell's suggestion belonged more to 1979 than to today, because of what he said at the end "with the exception of the digital". Digital communications,

Brock contended, were causing sizable alteration to this very issue in many areas - science being a good example. Brock stated that one of the fundamental differences between print communication and the web is that the latter has no space constraints. The implication being that if you wish to outline something in an enormous amount of depth and detail, and make it accessible to people, then you can on the web. That is a fundamental change in the power relationships described by Cornwell. This is not an instantaneous change, but it is a tangible one. And the effects are clear for all to see. Tabloid newspapers in the UK have lost between 3-5% of their circulation every year for the last 12 years, according to Brock. No one knows what to do about the problem and there are a few people for whom this is financially very significant -Murdoch being one. He reasoned that the mainstream media is really not sitting in the same way in relation to society as it did, and will continue to decline in the next five years. While the ability to bypass mainstream media is neither total nor universal, it is fundamentally changing the face of the media.

By way of closing Brock responded to questions. In the case of whether the British media should apologise for getting the issue of WMDs wrong, he stated that he would advise an editor against any sort of pompous, formal apology where they thought that the journalism had been properly conducted in the first instance, even if subsequent events showed it to be wrong. Any publication that claims that everything it says is correct is foolish. Brock did advocate that we adopt from American journalism the practice of 'walking back' mistakes when they are made, albeit in good faith, to try to determine how and why they occurred. The principle of officially reflecting on why something went wrong is a good example of transparency which, Brock argued, seemed to be the key to accountability.

Reflecting on whether a code of ethics should be adopted by the media, Brock didn't think it would solve all the problems, but he did advocate a system like the one in place at *The Times*, where all were given a copy of the Staff Handbook, which contained some basic ethical rules such as refusing presents, declaring a conflict of interest and so on, and also contained a copy of the PCC code. During his time there, Brock admitted to being surprised when other publications asked to borrow and adapt this handbook suggesting they didn't have one of their own. So Brock suggested that if some basic rules were in circulation, it would be a good practice and a good place to start. He concluded the session by saying that you can't centrally impose a code of ethics, but you can make it an easier for people to be transparent with their evidence.

## Session 4: Online Media - Godsend or Source of Tyranny?

Chair: Professor John Naughton - Open University and Wolfson College, Cambridge

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Naughton began the session by expressing concern that the conference had thus far focused on a media ecosystem which may not exist in fifteen years in anything like its current recognisable form. He suggested that it was difficult to talk about an ethical framework for a world that is evaporating before our eyes. And so he turned his attention instead to what might face us in the next fifteen years. Starting with the premise that the change currently underway in the communications environment is revolutionary, and that while many gathered at the conference are obsessively interested in it, nobody completely understands what is happening. In order to try to understand the enormity of the change, Naughton suggested a thought experiment. The Gutenberg Bible (1455) and the invention of movable type was, he argued, a colossal transformation for human kind. And so he asked all present to imagine being a MORI (the polling form) pollster in the year 1472, asking people on a scale of 1-5, where 1 is very likely, and 5 very unlikely, to rate the following statement: how likely is it that 1) printing will undermine the authority of the Catholic Church 2) trigger and power the Reformation 3) aid the rise of modern science 4) create whole new social classes and professions 5) change our concepts of childhood as a protected early period on a person's life? The point being that one only has to do the experiment to realise the fatuity of it. Printing did indeed have all of these effects, but there was no way that anyone in 1472 could have known how profound its impact would be. If we're currently facing something as radical as print was then, it would be foolish for any of us to say we know what it will do to us in the long run.

Naughton advocated that a way of graphing our future is to use an axis ranging from two extremes. On one extreme there is the Aldous Huxley world-view, and on the other is George Orwell's. Huxley believed we will be destroyed by the things we love, while Orwell thought we would be destroyed by what we fear. This, he suggested, is a good way of bracketing the possibilities we've got: at the Huxley end we have the libertarian and utopian dreams of the early pioneers of the internet where, some might argue, we have now arrived. At this Huxleyan end it is believed that the net has been a profoundly liberating influence in our lives; that we have arrived at Thomas Paine's dream world, where we have an explosion of free expression, unhampered by gatekeepers, and all the other apparatus of an older, more industrialised mass media system; and that we will have an expansion of the Habermas idea of the public sphere. Where previously a steady process of constricting media conglomeration was underway, we would instead have much greater openness and transparency, along the

lines of what happened with the Trafigura case. There is for some a sense in which we are on the brink of some sort of wonderful explosion in our possibilities for free expression and transparency.

But first we must examine where on this spectrum we are currently. Naughton suggests that what we have is something quite puzzling and contradictory. If you look at the internet you don't ever see a Gaussian distribution or bell curve, like you do in so much of the natural world - what you see is a parallel distribution. In other words, there are a few things on the extreme left of the curve, given and creating a lot of consumer attention. This then tails off the further right you go indicating little or no consumer attention. This strange skewed distribution – known as the Long Tail - happens by the agglomeration of billions of independent decisions made by independent agents. Something happens whereby a small number of things become very prominent and a large number of things exist and are available but in general are not paid much attention, which is the really interesting thing about the web. Additionally, Naughton referred to websites and blogs where anonymous commenting was allowed and where in places there has been an explosion of incivility and intolerance. So on the one hand you have this realisation of the utopian dream, and the dawning realisation that it may not be as wonderful as we thought – and in terms of the conference theme, what are the ethical implications of all this?

On the other hand, there is the Orwellian nightmare of the net as a vehicle for perfect surveillance, where everything you do can be tracked, whether by commercial companies such as Google, to which you entrust your click-stream, or GCHQ and other intelligence gathering services.

In addition there is the gradual realisation that it may not be true that the net interrupts censorship. Partly because we are selling to authoritarian regimes the kind of technology needed to make sure their citizen don't get around censorship. But more importantly, what we have seen is the fantastically ingenious adaptation of authoritarian regimes like the Chinese to use the net not just as a way of closing off information to its citizens, but also as means of feeding messages to them in a way that they find interesting and attractive.

And so one must ask: what is the implication of this? What can we expect for the next 15-20 years in this emerging digital ecosystem? In Naughton's opinion it is too early to say. Especially if, like he suggested, we take the Gutenberg analogy seriously. And in terms of an ethical discussion, there is a danger of what Marshall McLuhan used to call 'rear-view mirror-ism'. Naughton asked if the only way we can think about the future is through a prism effectively constructed from things we know about in the past. Journalists, he argued, have been conditioned to think about editing as something that happens at the centre of the process. He suggests that we may be moving to an ecosystem in which nothing is edited or

edited by consumer choice. And so taking about ethics in such a framework may indeed be beside the point.

Andrew Brown pointed out that the effects of new media technologies have been effectively to eliminate the gap between impulse and action. Push your finger and immediately you get what you want. Brown felt that this was not something we were yet able to cope with. Using the recent 'green revolution' in Iran, he argued that we all wanted to believe that new technology and Twitter specifically would overthrow a regime. Recent research indicated that no more than 60 people were using Twitter during the Iranian uprising. He suggested that we fooled ourselves because we wanted to believe it was possible.

Drawing on his experience of working with the police, Mohammad Khaliel of *Islamix.com*, spoke about the prevention of violent extremism, and one of the themes that comes through time and time again is the impact of online media on young fertile minds. He said this was relevant to the discussion in so far as it was also a conversation about education and repercussions. And while online media and the freedom of expression can lead to incivility and intolerance, equally, he felt, the question must come back to how people are allowed to vent their views and frustrations. A central theme to the day's discussions had been the division between communities. The Muslim community certainly don't believe that the media do them justice in their representation of them, but, he claimed, as the police well know, no community feels that the media do their group justice.

John Lloyd agreed with the point made by Naughton that authoritarian states were easily able to suppress debate and able to use information against their citizenship. Giving Russia as an example, he said that state sponsored operations were previously always much better resourced than the marginalised competition. Lloyd however felt that this was no longer the case. Independent newspapers such as *Novaya Gazeta* in Russia were now on the web, and this change has been radical in terms of getting criticism of the state to the Russian public. Readership of these websites would continue to grow. The same is said to be true of China and Egypt, but of course this is not without a cost, as there are regular crackdowns by the State. A further example Lloyd insisted was Italy: while not an authoritarian state, the fact that current Prime Minister Berlusconi personally owns the TV stations, make much of the media essentially state controlled. Therefore according to Lloyd the vast amount of the important debates are now taking place on the internet, which attracts very large audiences. Therefore he questioned the Orwellian account of the internet. While indeed there is suppression which is often very effective, it also seemed that civil society in these countries is pushing against this and is often successful.

Edward Stourton of the BBC questioned Naughton's Gutenberg analogy and suggested it could be turned on its head. Rather than asking what had changed, he suggested that what

was truly striking was what stayed the same. After all, it was a Bible that Gutenberg chose to print. According to Stourton, the consequences were an exploration of the past as well as a new gimmick. Stourton went on to argue that if that holds true and you bring forward and reflect on it in light of what is happening on the web can you not argue that the Pol-Pot-year-zero-interpretation is a little over dramatic? People he suggested will still choose to value editing and accuracy, so rather than thinking that the world is going to be completely ruled anew, is it not better to think that some of these things will survive in a different way?

Revisiting the impact that new media such as Twitter is having, Joy Lo Dico of *Prospect* magazine claimed that while there might only have been 60 Iranians with Twitter accounts during the recent 'revolution', more recent examples are remarkable and really changing the landscape. In the case of the Haitian earthquake, journalist Ed Pilkington *tweeted* from Haiti creating an interactive forum between himself and his followers. His tweets were reaching people before his posted stories were and unlike the Iranians he was a known quantity and a trusted source for information. She also suggested that twitter naturally lends itself to questioning and the voicing of dissent. In the Trafigura case, where mainstream media faced a gagging order preventing the reporting of a parliamentary question about the dumping of toxic waste, the law did not apply to media such as Twitter, where it was being discussed beyond the realm of judges and lawyers. As a result it was the most tweeted topic on the social media site. Another example was the case of Christine Platt, Chief Executive of the National Bullying Helpline, who broke confidentially in her announcement that staff at Downing Street had contacted her service. The BBC had to change the way in which they reported this story, due to the facts that were revealed about Platt over the course of a day on Twitter. It is evident that Twitter journalists are beginning to set agendas faster than mainstream journalism.

Khaliel voiced a note of caution about new media, pointing out that it was helping groups like Al-Qaeda. At one time, Al-Qaeda was restricted in how they communicated and were reliant on news stations such as *Al Jazeera* who would censor a lot of their material, as it was too provocative and inciting of violence. They no longer send their material to news stations, but instead post it directly to the web in full. They then telephone the news stations and tell them where to find it, but no longer give them the chance to edit/censor the material. This, for Khaliel, was a negative side of the internet.

Naughton, wrapped up the session by replying to these comments. In response to Andrew Brown and others on the topic of Twitter, and the gap between impulse and action, he commented that in almost every one of these cases he can see both good and bad things. He described *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger's use of Twitter to circumvent the whole apparatus of British legal control and break open the Trafigura injunction as being a "brilliant exploitation of this technology". On the other hand, for the very reason that the gap between impulse and

action diminishes with this technology you can see how firestorms will happen. Naughton conjectured that there was little difference between a Twitter firestorm and a lynch mob, under certain circumstances.

However, if we want free and independent journalism, and if the current business model is evaporating before our eyes, how we fund it has to be the most crucial question to answer. Nobody, according to Naughton, knows how to answer this question. Furthermore, in attempting to answer this, we need to distinguish between the future of journalism and the future of the newspaper. We need to focus on function, which we need to endure, not form. Arguing that we need some historical perspective, Naughton reflected on the evolution of broadcast radio. He outlined that for the first 20 years of its existence nobody knew how to make money from it, until Procter & Gamble decided to sponsor content and so the soap opera was born. The point being that when we are faced with big changes that we expect to have a great impact, we can expect it to take a while before these and our reaction to them becomes obvious. Naughton felt confident that we would eventually crack these problems that currently seem insurmountable to Murdoch and others.

## Session 5: Discussion – A Forum for Ethics and Faiths in the Public Space

Chair: John Cornwell

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John Cornwell introduced this session by outlining the Science & Human Dimension Project's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and its new ethics in the public space project. This project ( to be named *Ethicscope* ) will be run in association with the Science and Human Dimension Project based at Jesus College, Cambridge, and will be characterised by a number of annual events including conferences, specialist workshops, development of online resources, and the specific targeting of ethics across the school curriculum at 6<sup>th</sup> form level (16-18 year-olds) as well as schools of journalism, media and business.

After outlining the project, the floor was given to Bill Gent, an RE schools advisor and Research Fellow, Warwick University, who outlined how issues of faith and ethics are currently discussed and taught in schools. Describing a recent project funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which investigated the resources used to teach world religions and their contribution to community cohesion, it was found that textbooks were no longer the dominant source of information, having been replaced with internet resources such as YouTube. According to Gent this change has huge implications for a young person's understanding of other faiths, which in turn affects community cohesion. Gent gave the example of how schools teach and discuss issues such as the *hijāb*. Rather than forming an understanding of the Muslim principle of modesty, the *hijāb* is considered to be purely about the veiling of women, especially in the West. In other words, it is not key values and beliefs that are being taught, but issues. Worryingly, he thought, much of the material used to address these topics comes from websites, where there is no opportunity to evaluate the authenticity of the content.

Gent was also at pains to illustrate the current pressures faced by schools. While a school's legal requirement continues to be the 'development of the spiritual, cultural, moral and social education of its pupils', the arrival of Ofsted now requires that these goals must be measureable. Schools now have to justify their existence, proving that they are continuously improving, which in many ways drives out the spiritual. Gent claimed that increasingly schools describe themselves in business speak, 'rolling out' projects, reaching 'targets' 'mission statements'. It has become almost completely about continuous improvement and performance statistics dominate. Intuitively they have, so far, preserved the notion that their primary role remains to help young people to flourish.

Another development in the education sector is the increasing dominance of ICT. Schools, Gent claimed, are almost evangelical in their views on the role of ICT, but very little understanding or interest is given to how such reliance on ICT impacts on a person's worldviews. In parallel there are more and more counter ICT initiatives, such as *P4C*, (Philosophy for Children), which is often described as a thinking skills programme. To conclude Gent said it was a time of great tension within schools and that they needed support in gaining perspective and developing frameworks' of understanding.

Cornwell reflected on a recent comment by Archbishop Rowan Williams suggesting that the concept of a common good in society had given way to ideas of individual rights. Cornwell asked Paul Moore-Bridger, a religious studies and ethics teacher, if from a schools perspective Rowan Williams was correct? Moore-Bridger began by commenting on an earlier observation made by John Lloyd and Edward Stourton that many contemporary journalists do not know the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Moore-Bridger argued that this state of affairs existed because they were not being taught about such differences in school, due, he felt, to the ecumenism underlying the way the subject is taught. He made the observation that schools are predominantly worried 'about everyone getting on', and so remove any religious tensions in the teaching of faiths. He felt that both RE and SMSC (spiritual, moral social and cultural development) teachers are charged with the responsibility of solving all social ills in one hour a week. Issues of terrorism, teenage pregnancy, community cohesion, and all other sorts of intervention are given to them to fix and implement, leaving them with very little time to teach anything else. Furthermore, the curriculum pressure is such that teachers have to make sure their pupils get 5 A-C grade GCSEs (exams taken by pupils aged 16 in England) including English and Maths - anything else is largely irrelevant. In order to facilitate achieving these targets, other subjects are pushed to the margins.

Returning to the original question of teaching a common good when the prevailing climate pushes individual rights, he claimed that it simply and unfortunately does not come up as a consideration in the classroom. He felt that there was a recognition that the vast majority of state schools fail at very important areas of human development. Currently, schools are happier to send their pupils into the world neurotic but with straight A grades, rather than well rounded with Bs, as the latter doesn't play well in the league tables. To change this, one would have to change the regulatory framework and the way in which league tables operate before schools can really engage with considering educating the whole child. He finished by saying that the way in which RE and SMSC are received in a school comes down to the attitude of parents and management. So while it is a legal requirement to teach RE (5% of time through the key stages 1-4), these are national guidelines rather than a curriculum, and so what is taught is set locally, based on local needs. As a result the subject can quickly become marginalised and considered as a low status subject.

The discussion then turned to higher education with the chair asking both John Lloyd (Reuters Institute, Oxford University) and George Brock (Professor of Journalism at City University), how ethics are taught in their institutions. Oxford, according to Lloyd, does not have a specific ethics course on their journalism degree. At City University it depended on whether one was an undergraduate or postgraduate, but that there was a course for both. He went on to give a detailed example of the postgraduate course he teaches where ethics training is provided primarily through practice based dilemma. Two-hour long sessions are held whereby students are in groups, given a real life dilemma, and asked to come up with a solution; so it's practical rather than philosophical, and real-life rather textbook based. Susan Franks then described the course she teaches at the University of Kent - Media, Law and Ethics. Here, they take a more formal approach. All classes are compulsory and start from a broad philosophical perspective and gradually become more hands on, often ending with specialised speakers such as the media barrister Sir David Eady (Mr Justice Eady) who spoke at the end of their privacy module. BBC Editorial Policy Advisor Margaret Hill pointed out that many journalists are not actually formally trained and so the BBC College of Journalism and the BBC Academy are now a rich resource for such groups, which is good for the profession.

Cornwell then asked Sir Peter Lachmann to describe how ethics is taught to medical students and doctors. Lachmann noted that a big difference was the existence of a professional code for doctors enforced by the General Medical Council (GMC). He suggested it is pointless to have an ethical code unless it is also enforced. Glazebrook, reflected on Brock's description of teaching ethics in City University and maintained that it was better to teach moral philosophy before advancing to applied ethics, so as to ground students in the principles and competing influences.

Bob Low took issue with the assumptions made that journalists somehow swim in a different ethical sea to the rest of society. He pointed out that most journalists have been brought up in a similar moral environment as everyone else, both at home and at school, based on Judaeo-Christian values which Low said had always guided him in his journalistic life. He felt it was unfair to describe journalists as being separate from society in this respect. Cornwell disagreed with Low, suggesting that while journalists were indeed all members of society they were different in the respect of having the role of interpreting and presenting moral dilemmas to vast amounts of people. Cornwell therefore felt if one was to ask a Professor of Jurisprudence where he/she got their ethics from, while they too may say family or school, some professions also need to be able to systematise this knowledge and defend it. This he argued is the difference for journalists. Bob agreed that they have a duty to uphold ethics, but suggest that it is not that difficult to obey the ethical principles by which one is brought up. In response, Cornwell used the earlier example of animal human embryos and asked if it was

not the case that our traditional moral maps and boundaries have been outstripped by certain developments in science?

In response to the idea that one can assume that morality and ethics are taught at school, or are only required in journalism, Nick Ray described how the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University have had to add a course called "The Role of the Architect". This course was considered necessary because while they were teaching very bright young people, more and more students were starting university without a sense of where their judgements came from. They found that when they asked these students questions of an ethical and moral nature, it was often the first time that these young people had discussed such ideas.

Lloyd ended the session by exploring how a professional society or body, integral for so many other professions, would work for journalism. Such a society could provide accreditation, and by being accredited a journalist would be signing up to abide by a code of ethics and principles, the breaching of which would allow you to be struck off. While Lloyd acknowledged that this would be an absurd idea to most journalists, he maintained it would in fact provide a protection. In the same way that a doctor or lawyer can refuse to do something based on their professional code, it would protect journalists in telling the truth, and allow them to stand up to the pressure of their corporate owners. Currently other than resignation, journalists have no means of protecting their integrity, and so felt this was something that warranted further investigation.

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