

Wherefore art thou, honesty?

by Karin Mont MARH, ARH Chair



Karin Mont
MARH, ARH Chair

We generally equate the moral concept of honesty with truthfulness, and would define an honest person as one who tells the truth. But is it that simple? For example, is honesty merely an absence of lies, or is a person who tells a 'white' lie necessarily inherently dishonest? Is it even possible, or desirable, to be honest under all circumstances? Perhaps in the real world absolute honesty is an ideal to which we can only aspire. A more appropriate measure of an individual's moral character might be to evaluate how their actions impact upon others, and the environment in which they live.

However we choose to describe honesty, one thing is certain: honesty is not just the absence of lies. In fact we need look no further than how our mainstream media reports world events, to realise that we are constantly being manipulated, not necessarily by the telling of lies but, more importantly, by the absence of the 'whole truth'. Politics and vested interests increasingly dictate what news we hear, and how it is delivered. Even though most countries in the western world claim to value the fundamental democratic principles of rule of law, freedom of speech, respect for human rights, active political processes, and an enlightened public, our main news reportage has become increasingly selective about the information we receive, and the manner in which it is delivered. Arguably, it is only our ready access to independent, online publications, endeavouring to offer a 360 degree perspective on world events, which prevents us from being subjected to levels of media filtering more usually encountered in totalitarian regimes.

For well over three days, BBC news coverage focused almost exclusively on the violent attack which took place on 7 January 2015 against the Paris offices of the satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo. 12 people died in this horrific incident, and a major security operation was launched, deploying hundreds of armed police tasked with finding the killers. Two Islamic extremists, already known to the security services, were eventually tracked down and shot dead. There were two further incidents linked to the Hebdo killings, in which five more people were murdered, and a third extremist was killed.

Revenge, triggered by the front page publication of a controversial cartoon featuring the prophet Mohammed back in 2006, which many Muslims had found offensive, appears to have been the motivation behind the carefully planned attacks on Hebdo's offices. The incident, referred to by some as 'Paris's three days of terror', sent shockwaves through most of the western world. It prompted an unprecedented gathering of international leaders from over 40 different countries, who joined together with an estimated 1.6 million people to march through the streets of Paris. The rally

supposedly represented a unified statement against terrorism, and in support of press freedom. As most of us believe in our right to coexist in peace with our fellow humans, and to express ourselves without fear of censorship, it is easy for us to relate to the symbolism behind the Paris rally. Certainly the majority of the civilian participants were totally sincere, but can that honestly be said about some of the world leaders present?

For example, the Russian foreign minister was in attendance, yet two of his countrymen were prosecuted in Moscow for carrying 'Je suis Charlie' placards. In Saudi Arabia, a blogger from Jeddah was publically flogged, and given a ten year jail sentence, because he had set up a website inviting public debate. This did not stop the Saudi foreign minister from attending the Paris rally. Turkey, a country renowned for imprisoning journalists, sent along its Prime Minister. A picture of the rally, published in an ultra-orthodox Israeli newspaper, edited out the images of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, in order to present a female-free line up of world leaders. Needless to say, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is shown centre stage of this misrepresentative photo. It is hard to reconcile such an overt manipulation of facts with upholding the principles of a free press.

Whilst the world watched Paris come to terms with the Charlie Hebdo murders, an estimated 2000 people were slaughtered in Nigeria, by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram, whose name means 'Western education is a sin'. The horrific event received virtually no media coverage. It was as if African lives were considered to be less newsworthy than western lives. Equally worrying was the lack of news coverage by African countries, and the failure of any African country to condemn the attacks and demonstrate solidarity with Nigeria. Boko Haram has now secured most of the state of Borno, and it is only a matter of time before they claim this territory as their own. When this happens, the whole region will be adversely affected. Boko Haram not only slaughters its opponents, but tightly controls education, and outlaws freedom of expression. Under the circumstances it is unclear why this massacre was given so little media coverage, but it does highlight the bias of some news reportage.

It seems that even the Pope has his reservations about press freedom, making the somewhat un-Christian comment that someone who cursed his mother (meaning in this context, his religion) 'can expect a punch' in return. Considering that religion is used as the justification for most disputes and conflicts across the globe, this remark is unhelpful, because it

suggests that all religions, and their various interpretations, should be exempt from critical discussion.

History has repeatedly shown that attempts to suppress or censor religious debate invariably result in bloody, brutal and enduring conflict. History has also shown that where religion and differing ideologies are accepted, respected and valued for what they can contribute to society, communities prosper. Ultimately, we expect our politicians, broadcasters, press and citizens, to adhere to a mutually acceptable 'code of conduct' in matters relating to freedom of expression, which is not necessarily dictated to by law, but which is governed by conscience. In most western countries, this moral code appears to work quite well but, when conscience is superseded by political or financial expedience, the weaknesses manifest, and we don't have to look beyond our own shores to uncover some significant examples.

Several years ago, a colleague of mine wrote a carefully considered, well-researched article on the use of homeopathy on the farm. The article was initially accepted for publication in a major farming journal, but was inexplicably withdrawn at the last moment. It later transpired that a number of influential advertisers had threatened to cease advertising in the journal if the article went to press. Since then, there have been numerous similar examples. It has proved impossible to publish positive information about homeopathy in the mainstream press, even when a journalist or editor appears genuinely interested in the subject. By contrast, misinformation about homeopathy is commonplace, yet we are offered no proper right to reply. We are expected to endorse the principle of a free press, yet our individual right to freedom of expression is denied to us.

As many homeopaths know to their cost, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), a self-appointed regulator of the advertising industry, also attempts to censor information about homeopathy. Some people seem to believe that we should not challenge the ASA because, in the public perception, the ASA fulfil an important role in protecting us from misleading advertising, and we homeopaths should not consider ourselves to be exempt from abiding by the advertising code. Experience suggests that compliance with the advertising code is just the excuse used by the ASA to suppress the publication of any meaningful information relating to homeopathy and other CAM therapies. It is unlawful censorship and, if we truly believe in our right to freedom of expression, we have to have the courage and commitment to stand up to the bullying tactics of the ASA.

As a profession, we homeopaths have become so accustomed to being denigrated by the media that we tend to forget the implications of what is happening, and we almost take our censorship for granted. However it is both wrong and inexcusable that we have been silenced as a profession, in a country which purports to be an open and inclusive society. At least we know that suppressing information about homeopathy does not place the public at risk. However, the suppression of scientific data which demonstrates the adverse effects of many commonly used drugs, is a potentially lethal deception, which calls into question both the honesty and integrity of our so-called free society.

We know that all reportage relating to vaccination is highly selective, as demonstrated by press coverage of

the measles outbreak in Wales in 2013. Almost all the identified cases of measles were amongst the vaccinated population, a fact which was omitted by most of the reports. Parents were urged to take their children to be vaccinated, some were even accused of being irresponsible for refusing the vaccine, yet no one reported on the serious side-effects which the MMR vaccine can confer. The press was also conspicuously silent about the numerous adverse reactions experienced by thousands of young girls given Gardasil, the HPV vaccine. These adverse reactions include heart problems, seizures, stroke, personality change, paralysis and even death, but the UK press has proved reluctant to publish this information. India and Japan have even banned Gardasil, and other countries, such as Spain, are filing lawsuits against Merck, the vaccine's manufacturer, yet it is almost impossible to source this information via our press. The suppression of information, or the manipulation of facts, is fundamentally dishonest, and we deserve better from a press whose freedoms we are so ready to support.

Press freedom and freedom of expression appear to mean different things. In the UK, we may still be able to publically express our opinion on sensitive or controversial issues without fear of reprisal but, if our message challenges the status quo, our views, even if they are supported by facts, are unlikely to be published. The press on the other hand, seem to think that it is acceptable to publish material likely to offend the religious beliefs of others, but they prefer not to offend the medical establishment by publishing the truth about many of our drugs. We are told that the right to free speech should be almost absolute, and that a free society should be strong enough to absorb criticism and expose folly. If that is true, then why are we denied the right to publish positive information about homeopathy? Perhaps our society is not as free as we like to believe, and we actually feel threatened by criticism. That would explain why regulation remains such an attractive proposition to some, because through regulation you can exercise control, and through control you can minimise criticism or dissent.

Albert Einstein once said: '*Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted in important matters.*' Trust is the first casualty of dishonesty and, once breached, it is almost impossible to restore. Our mainstream press is not always free, fair or honest, and even the cherished BBC has demonstrated an ability to manipulate material which does not accord with its own particular agenda. We do have access to factual information, thanks to the emergence of numerous small, independent publications. Sometimes the internet can also provide useful information not reported elsewhere, though it is always important to choose a reliable source.

Why should we tolerate selective reporting from our mainstream media? If we want to put honesty back into reporting, we are going to have to demand change, boycott those who continue to mislead, and name and shame persistent offenders. 2015 marks the 800th anniversary of the signing of Magna Carta, a document which enshrined the privileges, rights and freedoms of the peoples of England. Our right to freedom of expression was developed from that document, and we need to have the patience, courage and determination to ensure we retain that right. □