Chapter 61: Good and Bad Taste

In this chapter, we examine what bad taste may mean in your society. We consider how you can avoid hurting or distressing people unnecessarily when writing news. We look at the use of pictures which might offend against accepted taste. We discuss the use of humour and stereotyping in journalism.

What is taste?

As a journalist, you must be sensitive in what you report and the words and pictures you use. It is very easy to offend people, often without knowing it.

If you obey the standards accepted by a society, you are said to exercise taste in your behaviour or writing. (Good taste has a different meaning in English. It means that you are judged by a particular group as sharing the same values and making the same kind of judgments as them. It normally refers to judgments on art, furnishing, clothes etc.)

If you do or write something which offends the generally accepted conventions or customs, this is said to be bad taste.

For example, in many societies, mentioning bodily functions during a meal is regarded as bad taste (or tasteless). Many societies do not like people who make fun of a person's race or sexuality, who joke about a person's religious beliefs or mock the poor or uneducated. You offend against the way a community likes to see its own world.

Assessing bad taste

It is important to recognise that one person's idea of bad taste may not be shared by all members of society. Bad taste varies from group to group. For example, it is generally agreed in most liberal societies that publicly laughing at the handicapped is bad taste. However, there are sub-groups which take pleasure in doing just that. Perhaps they are men drinking in a bar, perhaps youths hanging around street corners. Standards of behaviour also vary from society to society and can change with time. For example, it is acceptable in most developing countries for women to breastfeed their babies in public. However, this is not generally encouraged in some western societies (even though it happens and is becoming more common).

The bad taste you must be aware of as a journalist is that which offends conventions and customs which are generally accepted within your society.

Of course, some individuals are more easily offended than others. You cannot please everyone. What matters to you as a working journalist is to ensure that you do not offend your readers or listeners on matters which are generally regarded as sensitive within your society as a whole.

Reporting sensitive issues

You may sometimes have to report issues which are not normally discussed in society. You should only do so for a good reason, such as exposing an abuse or defending the right of people to be informed about matters which affect them or their society.

For example, you may be covering a story about the sexual abuse of children. You interview a woman who was abused as a child. It is a genuine issue of concern and should be covered because it is newsworthy. However, in your society, any public discussion of such issues may be taboo, so you are faced with a dilemma. Do you use a story which is of real public interest or not use it because it will probably offend people?

In democratic societies, the right of the people to be informed on public issues is most important. Your task is to find the best way of reporting this story properly while reducing the risk of offending your audience.
You would not, in this case, concentrate on the physical aspects of the sexual abuse, but focus instead on the effects it has on the child, the family and the community as a whole. You would need to include a reference to the physical problems, but it can be as brief as a sentence like: "Tina says she was sexually molested by her father every Saturday night for four years, whenever he came home drunk."

**Protecting victims**

Note here that, when you write stories about sensitive issues, you must consider whether or not you need to protect people, especially the victims. You must be aware of the likely reaction people will get from their community. In our example, will the woman be ridiculed or shunned because of what she reveals through your interview? If the risk is high, you should think about using an assumed name for her, to protect her identity. In such circumstances, you must, of course, tell your readers or listeners that this is not the person's real name. The use of assumed names is most common in stories about children, the handicapped and other vulnerable groups.

In most countries using the English legal system, when reporting court cases it is against the law to identify children. However, even when it is legal to reveal the identities of children, there may be strong ethical reasons for protecting children from publicity. Children can be easily hurt and are less able to defend themselves. People might treat a child differently because of what you write, and this could affect their growth. Something unpleasant said about a child can be remembered long after the child has matured and perhaps changed.

So even when the law allows you to identify a child in unpleasant circumstances, you should avoid doing it without a very good reason.

**The special problems of radio and television**

Radio is more accessible to people than newspapers. Most homes or communities have a radio set and the news goes to them mixed with all the other programs. They do not have to make special provision to buy it or have it delivered every day. It can be switched on and heard by everyone able to understand the language; they do not have to be able to read.

Because whole families might be listening to the radio or watching television at the same time, you cannot aim your stories only at adults or only at men or only at women. You need to present stories in such a way that you do not offend against what is generally accepted taste within ordinary families in your society. Of course, you could schedule reports which might be harmful to children later in the evening, but even then you cannot guarantee that children will not be listening or watching. By comparison, newspapers require a greater degree of learning before they can be read - and they can be kept away from children.

Additionally, it is more difficult for people to avoid reports which are offensive on radio or television. Although newspaper readers can stop reading a story they find offensive and move on to another story, radio and television audiences cannot avoid offensive material so easily. They can, of course, switch off that particular report once they know it offends them. But how do they know when to switch on again for the rest of the news or the current affairs program? Many people will endure a report they find offensive so that they do not miss the rest of the program.

You can help by warning your audience in advance that some of them might be distressed by the material you are about to broadcast. You can summarise the reasons simply by describing the material as "sexual" or "violent". Although people might not want to switch off (for the reasons we have just discussed), they can turn the sound down, look away from a television screen or send children out of the room while the item is on.

Because most people can listen to radio or watch television, not matter how old or young or illiterate they are, journalists do not usually broadcast grizzly descriptions of death, such as "His head landed 50 metres down the track and fellow passenger Mrs Patel later found bits of his flesh in her hair". Television journalist must take great care in selecting scenes of bombings or violent death.
You should not treat all your listeners or viewers like children, but you must remember that some of them are children.

Whether you work for a newspaper, radio or television station, you should not report exact details of how someone committed suicide. People who are depressed or mentally unstable might try to kill themselves using your description, while children might be tempted to experiment, with fatal results. This does not mean that you do not report suicides. But you can report, for example, that a person "died from an overdose of drugs" without naming the drugs or the quantity used.

**Language**

You must beware of bad taste in the language you use in your stories, even the language you give in quotes or as actuality on radio and television. This is especially so of swear words. Although some broadcasters will occasionally leave swear words in a piece of actuality to show the power of the speaker's feelings, this is best avoided.

There is a lot to be said for powerful language, but you must always be sensitive that not everyone will share your idea of what is powerful. It is no good condemning people as narrow-minded when they are offended - that will not lessen the effect.

Swear words do not usually add anything to meaning. Take out the swear words and you can still understand what people say.

You may face a problem in your society in choosing words to describe things which are not openly discussed. In many English-speaking societies, for example, there are no polite words to discuss certain parts of the body or bodily functions. People might use slang expressions among their friends and find it difficult to discuss the topic at all among strangers. As a journalist, you will have to find alternatives to slang words which offend against accepted taste in your society. Medical expressions are often acceptable alternatives, but in some cases these too will give offence to a lot of people. In addition, medical terms might not be understood by everyone.

In some cases, you will simply have to rewrite your story to avoid the danger area altogether. It should be possible to write an interesting and informative story without offending people unnecessarily.

It is worth keeping in mind the legal aspects of language use. In many countries, it is an offence to use obscene language. Whether the words are your own or an interviewee's, the journalist is responsible for them in law if a court decides that the words were obscene. The law does not often give you guidance on what it means by obscenity, talking vaguely about "the tendency to corrupt". So stay on the safe side in your language. You may believe your readers or listeners are too sophisticated to object to certain words. The law will judge whether the words were also obscene to less-sophisticated people, and they may be the ones who complain. (We say more on obscenity in Chapter 71.)

In multilingual societies, bad taste may enter the news through translations. Do not rely on your own understanding in cases where taste may be involved. Take the advice of other speakers within the group and, if you are still unsure, seek outside advice from language experts if available.

In any situation where you are uncertain about words which might be in bad taste, you must consult your editor. You might also want to discuss it with some people who know your society well and whose opinion you trust. Remember the classic rule: If in doubt, leave it out.

**Images**

Photographs and television pictures can offend people if they are in bad taste. In fact, journalists often face their biggest problem when deciding whether or not to use a picture which might offend readers or viewers. You may want to use a particular image because it is powerful and shows what happened more clearly than words. Journalists can usually find alternatives for words which are offensive, but you cannot usually find alternatives for powerful pictures.
One of the most famous war pictures of all times is a photograph of a naked child running screaming down a road in Vietnam after being burned by napalm bombs. The girl is naked and the expression of terror on her face is very distressing to see. But the photograph put all the horror of war into one image - and was used around the world.

You may have to make similar tough decisions about using a powerful picture which might offend or distress people. If you are ever faced with this dilemma, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is the picture legally safe (for example, not obscene)? If it is safe, ask:
2. Would many readers or viewers find it offensive? If they would, you must ask:
3. Is this the only image I can use to properly illustrate the story? If it is, you must still ask:
4. Is the story important enough to risk offending people by using this image?

If you get to Question Four and can still honestly answer "Yes", perhaps you should take the risk and use it. Remember, if you intend broadcasting something which might offend or distress your listeners or viewer, warn them in advance.

Some newspapers and magazines use photographs which have little or no news value, but which interest some of their readers. The best example is pictures of naked or semi-naked women. These can be offensive in many societies, not only because they show nudity but also because they present an image of women as being objects for men to get excited over. They may sell newspapers, but they are not real journalism.

Humour

There is a place for humour in journalism, but taste in humour is a very personal thing, not shared by everyone. Something you might find funny may leave another person cold. More important, funny remarks can actually offend lots of people. The kind of joke you can tell within a group of friends may not be appreciated outside it. The difficulty you face is in not knowing what might offend and what will be seen as funny. If in doubt, leave it out.

There is certainly no room in objective journalism for jokes at the expense of people with handicaps or with any other characteristics which are socially undesirable and beyond their control. There is no room for racist or sexist jokes; these will always offend someone.

In broadcasting, beware the "throw-away" line (this is usually an unscripted remark at the end of an item). Listeners often pay more attention to what you say than you imagine. Thus if you say at the end of a report on dwarfism "Well, I'll be back shortly", there may be someone who will place the wrong interpretation on your words.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is the process by which we think we recognise a common feature in members of a particular group (whether a race, religion, sex, occupation etc) and then attribute that feature to every member of the group, whether they possess it or not. Stereotyping becomes offensive when we attribute undesirable characteristics to people.

The most common form of stereotyping is racial or national. The English tell jokes about Irishmen being stupid; white Americans make jokes about black people being lazy; many races make jokes about Jewish people being greedy. Most nationalities or races have similar kinds of stereotypes about other groups.

Stereotyping is a lazy way of defining people and often incorrect. Even when the stereotypes are true about a lot of people in the group, there will be some members who do not fit the stereotype. Although you can report people's images of other people as opinions, you should not report stereotypes as facts. There is no place for stereotyping in news reports.

Stereotyping can be quite subtle, even down to choosing whether or not to cover a story which either confirms or denies the stereotype. All sorts of people commit crimes, but when Chinese people in a non-
Chinese society break the law, the stories are often accusations that they belong to a secret criminal society (or Triad). Chinese people are often stereotyped as members of a criminal gang, even though most Chinese people are law-abiding.

News should be judged on its news value - whether it is new, unusual, interesting, significant, and about people - not on how it reflects a racial or sexual stereotype.

**Fear and alarm**

It is worth mentioning here that you should also be sensitive to the effect your story may have on people beyond simply offending them. If you write something which causes unnecessary fear or alarm you are demonstrating a lack of sensitivity.

There is a difference between warning people of a danger and exaggerating that danger just to make your story more interesting. You should never try to provoke interest by frightening your readers or listeners. For example, if you discovered a case of typhoid within a community, it would be wrong to write that typhoid was raging through it. It might make a more powerful story, but it would not be the truth. It is better to give the facts and maybe quote expert medical opinion, then allow your readers or listeners to decide how seriously they should take the threat.

Again, you should remember the power of the media. The written word is still regarded as absolute truth in some societies, while radio can be heard by people of all ages. What an adult might find interesting could cause a child to have nightmares.

The classic example of bad taste leading to fear and alarm was a famous broadcast by American actor Orson Welles on October 30, 1938. To enliven a radio play based on the H.G. Wells novel *War of the Worlds* for listeners of the American CBS radio network, Orson Welles pretended that the invasion by Martians was taking place there and then in New York. He even had make-believe "news flashes" telling how the Martian war machines were devastating the country.

An estimated two million listeners, not realising it was only a drama, fled their homes in panic, creating the biggest traffic jams in history and causing chaos in communications as terrified people tried to warn families and friends of the "invasion".

Fortunately no-one died in the chaos, but Welles' action was widely condemned as irresponsible. Many people threatened to sue him and the radio network for damages.

A similar broadcast on a radio station in Ecuador the following year had similar results, but when the listeners realised they had been tricked, they burned the radio station down, killing six members of staff.

**TO SUMMARISE:**

*Always be aware of what is bad taste in your society*

*Avoid swear words and other language which will offend*

*Do not make jokes at the expense of people's disabilities*

*Do not present stereotypes as facts*

*Do not incite unnecessary fear and alarm when warning your audience of danger*

*If in doubt, leave it out*