The Mertonian journalist

The impact of one monk’s philosophy on ethics and practices

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Trappist monk, poet and social commentator Thomas Merton (1915-68), who was tucked away in a Kentucky abbey from the 1940s until his death in Thailand in the late 1960s, needed to stay informed about the world so that his messages about social justice would have contextual meaning after they were published and critically reviewed. Yet although Merton needed the media, he often felt a general disdain for it, especially television. (Merton admitted he only watched television a few times in his life because he felt nightly newscasts offered little insight. He believed that talking heads relied too much on conjecture to suppose what could happen. As one commentator points out:

“Commercial television reflects back the attitudes of the audience it serves. It is a medium of consensus. …David Halberstam called it ‘the cheering section for the side that has already won’ ” (Higgins, 48).

As such, Merton felt a philosophical dichotomy about media and the truth it says it conveys. Reporters and broadcasters say they report the truth, but Merton argued that the predominantly male, middle class and white reporting corps of the 1940s-60s were rather ethnocentric and blind to the real truth of the world because of their social privilege and status. That is, they framed their stories from a certain point of view that was more or less imposed by their own background or employer. So the question for
journalists then and now is what can one learn from a monk who didn’t have a lot of kind thoughts about the news media? Simply this: Merton’s point of view can help journalists formulate an individualized ethical code.

Journalists say it is their job to hold up a mirror to our mosaic culture and help us understand the context of our daily lives by reporting on the day’s events and sometimes commenting on it either explicitly or implicitly. Or so goes the theory. But the best of all theories can go awry and what Merton said he saw when he looked at the media landscape was a world of spin and sound bites. That begs two questions: What can be done? Followed, obviously, by: So where does Merton fit in?

Well, to answer the second question first, Merton could speak to us if we are familiar with his works (e.g., The Asian Journals of Thomas Merton, or New Seeds of Contemplation, or Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, or The Seven Storey Mountain, among others). Some readers seeking a certain kind of enlightenment learned to trust him to point them to the truth. They connected with him, said a monk who lived with him in the Kentucky abbey:

His affective sensitivity contributed greatly to his remarkable capacity to enter with feeling into the inner experience of others. This power of empathy in large measure accounts for a quality of his writings, of his teaching and counseling that enabled him effectively to communicate his views to a wide variety of persons. Many who read him feel he knew them and their struggles personally.

(personal correspondence with Dom John Eudes Bamburger, August 22, 2005)
Now, as to the first question: What can be done? It all begins with a simple declarative sentence. In his essay *Raid on the Unspeakable*, Merton said a poet’s art depends on an ingrained innocence that serves the poet but would hinder a career in business or politics. That view can dovetail into a hypothesis on what could be termed the Romantic View of Journalism – in other words, to report the truth, tilt at windmills and expose wrongdoing is the essence of Romantic Journalism.

Camus, as editor of a clandestine resistance newspaper, *Combat*, learned the seriousness of words. When you realize that you may be shot for your editorial, he said, you weigh what you say. You make sure you mean it (Inchausti, 143).

So to be more precise and mean what we say (Romanticism), Merton calls for a purification of the media in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1968a). And one of the first steps toward purification is a commitment to ethics:

The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to see. Unless we see, we cannot think. The purification must begin with the mass media (p. 77).

Being committed to the truth is an idea that ties in with any so-called Romantic view. (To be clear, there is no Romantic Theory of Journalism per se, but the hypothesis is that there is an understanding among journalists to constantly work to get at the truth
and to keep watch against abuses of power. Thus, the phrase is this author’s attempt at framing an ethos in the profession that can probably best be summarized in the sentence that it is the job of journalism “to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted,” attributed to columnist Finley Peter Dunne (1867-1936). But truth is also the principle that forms the first rule of many professional ethical codes; for example, the Society of Professional Journalists suggests the following, which was first published in 1973 and updated throughout the years without major changes to the following major principles:

- **Seek Truth and Report It** (Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.)
- **Minimize Harm** (Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.)
- **Act Independently** (Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know.)
- **Be Accountable** (Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.)

How does all that tie together? Well, an example would be to look at the role the media played in the struggle for civil rights in the United States in the late 20th century. At that time Merton was also writing prolifically and movingly about peace and the Cold War, and about racism and the Civil Rights Movement. His first published statements on the struggle for civil rights in the United States came in a collection of essays and reviews called *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), in which he said that integration must be more than superficial. It cannot be a temporary solution.
designed to make people feel good about doing something they think is right. Indeed, inclusiveness isn’t total civil rights; what is further needed, Merton argued, is a fundamental re-examination of values so that all people see the responsibility we have to each other to foster human dignity.

For Merton, this was framed best in the writings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who espoused nonviolence in what was essentially a movement steeped with the philosophy of Christianity. As a gesture of support, Dr. King was scheduled to visit Merton at the abbey in the spring of 1968, but the visit was postponed when Dr. King decided to go to Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers there. Dr. King’s subsequent assassination led Merton to write that ’68 was “a beast of a year” (Other Side of the Mountain, 78).

So how could someone cloistered away in the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, write about civil rights? Well, Merton would say he was of the world, but not in the world. And he could argue for a necessary sensitivity on the part of the messenger and the message. What he wanted to see was a spark of human grace as images of high school students facing the taunts of a crowd in Little Rock came to us via television. TV newscasts also showed the world civil rights marchers blasted with fire hoses in Birmingham; it chronicled the quiet patience and fortitude of people who sat at lunch counters in the deep South amid a hostile crowd; it covered the story as reporters were beaten along with the Freedom Riders who tested real integration on buses and in bus stations; and it told the world about the violent Klan reaction to Freedom Summer as African Americans registered to vote. The media framed those stories in the context of how America was asked to keep its promise of freedom and opportunity for all. So
Merton would argue that ethical journalists should examine their reportorial techniques and explore the denotations and connotations of words, images and thoughts that give meaning to messages.

But it’s more than just the words that reporters use, actions also matter for journalists who work from a Mertonian perspective. What acts define a Mertonain/Romantic journalist? Well, one element of literary Romanticism that merges with journalistic Romanticism is a challenge to authority. For a journalist, that can be done simply by filling the watchdog role. Loren Ghiglione (2005), the former dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, said it is the role of journalists to monitor government, business, religion and other powerful institutions and tell the truth about them (p. 415).

Merton personalized that somewhat. Although he took a vow of obedience, he also rebelled when he felt the greater good was to campaign for a peaceful and just world. His 111 Cold War letters, written to friends around the world from October 1961 to October 1962, are an example. His insights about humanity on the brink of possible annihilation are valid for any time, according to Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon, the editors of Cold War Letters. The point is that it is a journalist’s duty – and sometime a quiet monk’s – to keep writing the truth.

In early 1962, Merton was in fact silenced … “Now here is the axe,” he wrote Jim Forest on April 12, 1962. “The orders are, no more writing about peace.” How was a monk, forbidden to publish his most prophetic thoughts, to seek the
impossible goal of challenging the mentality of millions of people? Thomas Merton simply continued to write letters, one by one. (Bochen, 2006, p. xiii).

Merton’s Romantic stance could actually be traced to a pre-Romantic, the English poet and painter William Blake (1757-1827). Merton wrote his master’s thesis on nature and art in Blake. Merton scholar Michael Higgins (1988) calls Merton “the Blake of our time” because each took a dehumanizing culture to task.

Under a Romantic View of Journalism crusading reporters are hard at work exposing wrongdoing and are writing outside the pale of influence peddlers. But there are also the exceptions, such as Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair, who made up quotes, people and situations. John Wilkins, who wrote the forward to Higgins’ *The Muted Voice*, tells the story about the journalist who turned in a feature story even though he did not believe what he wrote. His explanation was that someone else would have written the article if he didn’t and, besides, he needed the money. Or there is also the story about the slogan on a tabloid’s office wall: “Make it first, make it fast, make it accurate,” under which someone had penciled in “Then go and make it up.” (Higgins, 2000, p. 14) However, ethical concerns for journalists go beyond the cardinal rule: Thou Shalt Not Lie. There are other scenarios to consider.

One is determining whether an objective media message should persuade or motivate an audience (of readers, listeners, viewers or any combination) to some sort of action. (Blake would say it should.) Media practitioners and savvy media consumers should think about why and how the media has made so many of us voyeurs to so much hate. There is an implicit theme of social responsibility that ties in with the Romantic
View of Journalism that says report the truth at all costs. But is that enough? And if we accept that there are countless silent witnesses who watch and do nothing, then is the role of the media to urge people to action by reporting grim reality, or is it to simply report and challenge people not to be silent witnesses?

That idea ties in with the famous early 20th century Lippmann-Dewey debate about the role of the media. To briefly summarize: journalist Walter Lippmann said that the masses were susceptible to the power of institutional propaganda, so the best way to make sure relevant information gets out to the people who need it is to take social responsibility and, perhaps, regulate the media. Philosopher and educator John Dewey replied that the media must help America be a truly democratic and free society, therefore all people must get and understand the news of the day. The problem facing communicators was to get people to be active, thus Dewey would say that the libertarian role of the media is to goad silent witnesses into some form of action against societal wrongs by reporting all the facts. The best way to do that is to open up the marketplace of ideas and provide all the information people need to make informed choices, but also not to limit the fluff about celebrities du jour.

So the goal of ethics, then, especially from a Merton/Blake perspective, is to get both the media and the consumer to evaluate and contextualize:

1. The media’s implicit and explicit messages vis-à-vis established ethical, moral and social principles.

2. The ways that media messages sometimes hinder real communication and thus add to injustice through stereotypical, prejudicial and discriminatory reporting that does not get to the root issues. If properly analyzed, that means people should
also recognize the role of the media to promote understanding, respect and the value of diversity.

3. The social system itself that gives the media significant power in influencing public opinion and its total impact on diverse groups in American society.

Yet something else entered the mix after Dewey’s and Lippmann’s debate. What the media-savvy consumer must be concerned about today are the number of news outlets and so-called “journalists” who have no formal journalistic training or ethical background. New social media sites allow an audience itself to do the reporting while professional editors sit in more traditional, gatekeeping roles. Obviously, some of Merton’s ideas can apply to the emerging field of citizen-journalism.

**Values of the ‘romantic’ press**

Blake’s values gradually took hold with the Romantics (William Wordsworth said he preferred the madness of Blake to the sanity of Lord Byron). But it would take a bit longer before a commitment to the truth would be realized in the American press. It wasn’t until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the American media saw the ethical light. Today’s field of citizen-journalism may be on the evolutionary road to developing an ethical code, though it’s not there yet.

So while the legacy media and the new cadre of citizen-journalists grapple with the role of ethics in their working lives, they can turn to Merton for a path to ethical enlightenment. While Merton was maturing as a monk inside the monastery, outside those walls a greater desire for social responsibility was growing in newsrooms and in the
public consciousness. Former Washington Post columnist Colman McCarthy lived in a Trappist monastery for five years in the 1960s. A 1962 visit from social activist Dorothy Day inspired him to work for social justice outside the walls. After he left the monastery, Day urged McCarthy to go into journalism and use his skills for greater social good (Schmalzbauer, p. 55). Merton would see the value in Day’s advice and McCarthy’s action. In his essay, *Answers on Art and Freedom*, Merton said that it is the best interests of government to allow writers, poets and artists a degree of autonomy. Merton Scholar Michael Higgins, in *The Muted Voice*, says it is appropriate to also read “journalist” when Merton mentions artists, writers and poets.

**Implications**

Merton values individualism and what he would want are journalists examining their working lives and coming up with an individual moral code that puts faith in truth through their words and actions. Paradoxically, in a profession that values reporting all the truth, there might be a need for occasional self-censorship. But Merton doesn’t mean the self-censorship designed to appease an advertiser or government official, or to please a general audience, but a thoughtful self-censorship with a purpose.

Some examples:

1.) Merton sometimes bowed to requests from Trappist censors. He was always sensitive about the effects of his words so he saw self-censorship as an act of love because God was working through him to attain ends Merton could not know (Mott, pp. 76-8). Merton would say reporters self-edit and editors question words and phrases out of love for the audience (which needs to know
the truth) and the profession (which seeks and reports the truth and lives on its reputation).

2.) Newsrooms sometimes have to decide whether to publish or broadcast gruesome images. Journalism think-tanks, such as the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., suggest media outlets seek audience involvement.

3.) Bob Steele, the Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values and a senior faculty member of ethics at The Poynter Institute, said there are instances when reporting the truth might do harm, such as broadcasting sensitive facts during hostage negotiations or troop movements before a battle (personal correspondence with Bob Steele, September 25, 2007).

So once the journalist has figured what to report, the question then arises how. Ethically, there is a danger in being lazy and not choosing words carefully, as seen from a passage from Merton’s *War and the Crisis of Language*, which dealt with the language of escalation that leaders used during the Vietnam War. Some reporters used the government’s words and Merton would say that their choice to print or broadcast in government-speak showed how little they valued truth as they succumbed to the propaganda machine:

…the language of escalation is the language of naked power … Yet the language itself is given universal currency by the mass media. It can quickly contaminate the thinking of everybody.

Once again, the use of language to extol freedom, democracy, and equal rights, while at the same time denying them, causes words to turn sour and to rot in the minds of those who use them.
The daily toll of the killed (or the “kill ratio”) is perfunctorily scrutinized and decoded. And the totals are expertly managed by “ministers of truth” so that the newspaper reader may get the right message.

Our side is always ahead. He who is winning must be the one who is right. But we are right, therefore we must be winning … There is no communicating with anyone else, because anyone else who does not agree … is evil, is already in hell.

**Conclusion**

Higgins said in *Heretic Blood* that Merton never completely withdrew from the world. The quote above shows that he had, in fact, become a citizen of the world. A sense of self-awareness is essential to journalism and also consistent with Merton’s view of monasticism. Merton describes the monk as “someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the world and its structures… the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent” (Merton, 1973, p. 329). Merton says he chose to be a monk, in part, because he did not want to be contaminated by the world’s institutional evil. Instead he was determined to be “in the world, but not of the world” (McDonnell, 1962, p. 5).

If we take the time to even informally formulate ethical codes, how do we use them? Merton said that what must be avoided is using an ethical code as a self-serving means to prove purity. Down such a path is the self-advertisement of a counterfeit. For as he wrote in *Events and Pseudo-Events*: 

We believe that the “news” has a strange metaphysical status outside us: it “happens” by itself. Actually, it is something we fabricate.

The genuine saving event, the encounter of man with Christ in his encounter of love and reconciliation with his fellowman, is generally not newsworthy. Not because there is an ingrained malice in journalists but because such events are not sufficiently visible. In trying to make them newsworthy, or visible, in trying to put them on TV, we often … reduce them to the common level of banality.

…If we love our own ideology and our own opinion instead of loving our brother, we will seek only to glorify our ideas and our institutions and by that fact we will make real communication impossible.

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References


