



Opinion by
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Why Journalists Need Human Rights Training

The United Nations has recently singled out journalists and media professionals as in need of increased education about human rights, as part of the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Its first phase (2005-2009) focused on human rights education within primary and secondary school systems. Educating children about human rights is a logical starting point.

The second phase (2010-2014) focused on human rights education in the higher education sector and for teachers, civil servants, law enforcement officials and military personnel. Again, a fairly logical choice if you want to raise awareness, and increase respect for human rights.

In a move that has taken many by surprise, the UN Human Rights Council, two weeks ago, decided that journalists and media professionals should be the target audience for the third phase (2015-2019). When one thinks of human rights education, there are other groups that spring to mind before journo: persons with disabilities, minorities and Indigenous peoples would all welcome being empowered through increased knowledge of human rights and how to assert them. What then is behind the decision to target journalists?

It's a curious decision given all the talk about the demise of journalism within mainstream media organisations and the rise of "citizen journalists" using new media technology. But if we look at the coverage of some recent news events by the media, we see that targeting journalists for training about human rights may not be a bad idea.

Last year a court ordered that four sisters, aged between nine and 15, were to be returned to Italy to live with their father. Channel 7 news filmed the four girls being removed from their mother and taken to the airport. For a TV crew to film these children at such an emotionally charged time, when they were in a highly distressed state, was a clear violation of their human rights.

Children have a right to privacy and dignity, so that decisions concerning them will be made taking into account their best interests. Splashing these images across the television and internet shows a disturbing lack of respect of these girls' rights and demonstrates that these journalists and media organisations have no understanding of, or respect for, the human rights set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty which Australia has ratified.

Recent saturation media coverage of the arrival of asylum seekers by

boat, also suggests that educating journalists and media organisations about human rights could be useful. Instead of blindly repeating the government's descriptions of people seeking asylum as "illegals" and "queue jumpers", journalists should study the UN Refugee Convention which clearly states that people have the right to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum.

This is a fundamental right that applies regardless of how they arrive and whether or not they have valid travel or identity documents. Thus, an understanding of human rights might stop newspapers and other media outlets incorrectly referring to people legitimately seeking asylum as "illegal boat arrivals".

Derryn Hinch is a person who springs to mind when we think about human rights training for people working in the media. His inability to comprehend the fundamental principle that an accused person has the right to a fair trial was on display when he published details of the criminal history of Jill Meagher's killer, Adrian Bayley, before there had been a determination of his guilt by the courts.

Of course, we are all aware of the role that the media played in the recent UK phone hacking scandal. One would need a whole book to cover the human rights violations committed by employees of the now defunct Murdoch publication, News of the World.

The UN Human Rights Council is not the first organisation to consider the human rights responsibilities of journalists, although it is the biggest. The group, Journalists for Human Rights, analysed all media coverage in Canada relating to Indigenous peoples and found that media stories about Aboriginal issues made up less than half of one per cent of media coverage, most of that coverage focused on crises, and most of the crisis coverage was negative. Would an analysis of media coverage of Indigenous people in Australia reveal a similar situation?

So the UN Human Rights Council may just be on to something. Making journalists and media professionals the focus of the next phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education shines a light on the important role that this sector of society plays in ensuring a right respecting culture. The challenge now is for Australian media organisations and journalism schools to heed this call to action, and to start taking their human rights responsibilities seriously.

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