

Newspaper comment must be ethical

There have been posts on Facebook recently about the standards of newspaper journalism in Swaziland and whether comment writers need to abide by ethical codes.

Some people are saying writers of 'my opinion' pieces aren't 'journalists', so the ethical rules that apply to full-time employees of newspapers don't apply to them. This isn't the case.

The word 'journalist' covers a multitude of newspaper tasks and not just news reporting. So, feature writers, opinion writers, photographers, the people who write the headlines, the editors, and so on are all 'journalists'. The term applies to people whether they work full-time for a media house or only contribute the occasional piece. It doesn't matter if comment writers have day-jobs somewhere else: when they write for the newspapers they are 'journalists' and they are expected to stick to the rules like everyone else.

Some Facebook posters also think that comment writers are allowed to say anything they want and it doesn't necessarily have to be true, because it's the writer's own 'opinion'.

That isn't true. Comment writers have to abide by the same laws and ethical codes as anyone else. Take the defamation (libel) law, for example, that protects people from false attacks on their character. Suppose a comment writer says in his column that a person he names was sacked from his job, even though this isn't true. When he is accused of libel it's no use him telling the court, 'It was an honestly-held opinion'. It was not true (even if the writer thought it was, but did not check his facts) and he and the newspaper that published the article would have to pay damages to the person libelled.

Libel laws differ from country to country, and many of them allow that writers should be allowed to have opinions, but there are limits. If a writer were to be accused of libel, the main defence he might have would be that what was written was 'fair comment' or 'honestly believed'. But, for this defence to succeed, the writer must show that the comment was made without malice or disregard for the truth.

The Swaziland National Association of Journalists (SNAJ) code of ethical conduct says something on this. Article 12 on separating comment from facts states, 'While free to take positions on any issue, journalists shall draw a clear line between comment, conjecture and fact.'

SNAJ also has this to say about facts. 'The duty of every journalist is to write and report, adhere to and faithfully defend the truth. A journalist should make adequate inquiries, do cross-checking of facts in order to provide the public with unbiased, accurate, balanced and comprehensive information.'

So, opinion writers must beware - they have no special privileges and must stick to the same rules as all other journalists.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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