

Journalists must stand up and break censorship

Speech by Matthew Caruana Galizia at the Free European Media Conference, Gdansk, 16 February 2018

What are ethics? What is self-censorship? My father, brothers and I spent our first Christmas without my mother together, in a cottage hidden away in rural England. We cooked, played Monopoly and watched cowboy films by Sergio Leone. It reminded me why my mother liked them so much—her first regular column was called The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

In life, like in these parables disguised as films, there are the good guys, the bad guys, the not-so-bad guys and the guys who stand around in the background doing nothing. My mother liked to say that the word 'choices' co-habits with the word 'decisions' and that it is these two things which, over the long term, define us and whether we are good, bad or a waste of space.

Often, these are decisions that have to be made in the blink of an eye and your choice will set the course for the rest of your life. There are the decisions made under the table: the decision to accept or reject a bribe. The decision to offer a bribe.

Kill a story to secure next month's paycheck

There are the decisions made in the newsroom. The decision not to publish a story because it might put you in danger. Or the decision to cave in to your editor's demands that you kill a story, exchanging your dignity for the security of next month's paycheck.

Then there are the decisions that are made in the boardroom. This is important because we often forget that it takes two to self-censor. There was the decision by Henley & Partners, the Swiss company that sells Maltese passports, to harass my mother with constant legal threats. Or Pilatus Bank, the private bank that filed defamation suits against her in the US for millions of dollars, in an attempt to stop her writing by bankrupting her.

For every act of self-censorship by a journalist, there's a politician or a business out there putting pressure on them to change their story and to rob their readers of the right to know.

My mothers bank accounts were ordered to be frozen

A few months before my mother was assassinated, a cabinet minister in my country's current government obtained an illegal court order for her bank accounts to be frozen. My mother chose to continue reporting despite this pressure to self-censor, and more so after she uncovered evidence that the prime minister was coordinating a campaign of lawsuits against her, hand-in-hand with the corporate and criminal interests that she had reported on.

In my mother's own words:

It's an extremely difficult situation, but 30 years of trying to bulldoze me into the tarmac haven't worked for no reason other than my character traits. It is the nature of my personality to think in terms of "Do your worst, you bastards, until the only option left to you is to take out a contract on my life. Let's see where your obsession takes you." But this is not learned. You are either that way, or you are not. And living like that shapes your life in a way that few people can handle, which I understand completely. Without a fighter's personality, I would have stopped writing for the newspapers in 1991 already.

Others did not have the strength or the sense of purpose and civic duty needed to do what she did. They capitulated at the first sign of a threat.

We have to let journalists in that position know that they don't have to self-censor, that within the international community of states and organizations, they have allies who will give them the backing that they need.

Journalists have a duty to break censorship laws

A board member of the Association of Polish Journalists came to this conference to defend Poland's new censorship laws. Members of the audience chose to speak out against this outrage instead of remaining silent. Now we must tell Polish journalists that when the censorship law comes into force three months from today, it is their duty to break it, and that the international community will back them in doing so.

Let's see the government of Poland attempt to arrest one of you for breaking the censorship law. If they do, they'll be making fools of themselves. If they don't, then the law is defeated.

I was only ever asked to censor my work once. I confronted my editor about it, published anyway, then resigned. My colleagues did the same thing. We did it even though we had no new job lined up—it simply felt as though it was the right choice to make. One of my biggest regrets is that I never told my mother what example instructed me to do this.

I must have been about nine or ten years old. It was before the Internet became widespread and my mother would type out her opinion column for the Times of Malta on an Amstrad computer, print it and deliver it to the newspaper's offices. On one of these deliveries my brothers and I happened to be sitting in the back of the car. My mother parked, walked across the road to the newspaper building, manilla A4 envelope in hand, and disappeared into the doorway. After a long wait there was a lot of noise and she came storming out, pursued by her editor, who was red in the face and in a complete panic.

My mother resigned when the editor refused to publish

The printed column that she held in her hand was about the ethical failings of a politician who happened to sit on the newspaper's board of trustees. The editor refused to publish it, and my mother resigned on the spot. No one ever told me this or explained what happened—I was considered too young—but I understood instinctively what my mother was doing and why.

I'll never know whether she did that on purpose, to teach my brothers and I a lesson, or whether it was an accident that we were there. Either way, the point is that these things have to be taught, witnessed, demonstrated and told. If they aren't then there's no model and there are no standards.

Tell stories of ethical and unethical behavior, talk to each other about self-censorship and do not sacrifice your dignity or betray your readers. Set the bar high for yourself and your trade, set standards and hold yourselves to them. Learn from the examples set by others who've been there before you.