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Safeguarding Personal Integrity

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THERE is an old Irish saying, Is duaine cliu ná saoghal. Reputation is more lasting than life.

You will find it on the back of a box of Cara matches, and you'll find it on the front page of my contacts list which now contains the phone numbers, details and sometimes personal histories of some thousands of people that I have come into contact with in my five years as a working journalist.

The match box mantra is more than an age old cliché. It is also my ethical screen saver and spam filter.

The phrase flashes up on my computer terminal and in my sub conscience every single day.

It has a dual function. It reminds me of the huge responsibility that I bear as a reporter to those whose lives and activities that I write about with a level of scrutiny that, if I am honest, I would not like cast on my own.

It also reminds me of my own reputation as a professional news reporter and serves as a constant beacon that my professional standing is contingent on integrity.

I believe integrity lies not only in your by-line, but more importantly in the behaviour behind it.

I was introduced to my little Gaelic phrase at what I now believe was a critical point in the early years of my professional career.

Four years ago, aged 25 and just recently graduated from the MA in journalism programme at Dublin City University, I secured a retained freelance position with The Sunday Times Newspaper.

I couldn't believe my luck and I am eternally grateful to Fiona McHugh and John Burns, my former editors, for taking a chance on a young and inexperienced reporter.

It was a carrot and stick affair. The dangling carrot was the prospect of a staff position. The stick with which I beat myself was the drive to deliver and earn a permanent place in the newsroom.

It was also a baptism of fire. Journalism school doesn't prepare you for the reality of a highly pressurised newsroom, nothing can, but as luck would have it that one of my first ever stories was one of my biggest.

The story was about an Irish teenager, badly burnt in a fire when she was a toddler, who had volunteered to become the worlds first ever face transplant patient.

The operation, subject to ethical approval, was to be carried out by Peter Butler, an eminent Irish surgeon working at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

The story was guaranteed to be front page news and the London desk cleared space on their front page to carry the news line too. Getting your by-line into the British edition was like breaking Watergate, or so it seemed, and I was delighted with my scoop.

In the course of my research, I contacted the mother of the young girl, who I'll call Niamh.

Niamh's mother confirmed the details of the tragic accident and the consequences of young children playing with matches. She also confirmed my tip-off that Niamh was travelling to Britain for preliminary tests, but as Niamh was a teenager who was more self-conscious than most young girls about her appearance, she asked me not to disclose her identity.

I agreed, it seemed only fair in the circumstances. Niamh was also a minor and we afforded the family the added reassurance that legally we couldn't identify her anyway.

The only identifying factor was our reference, buried deep in the copy, that the young transplant volunteer was from the midlands. We thought "the midlands" was sufficiently vague to ward off identification. We were wrong.

Looking back, it wouldn't have made a difference if we said that she was from Mars.

Within hours of the story breaking, the hunt was on. Suddenly it wasn't my or even The Sunday Times story anymore. It wasn't even an Irish story.

In addition to the Irish papers that followed the lead, a cavalcade of reporters arrived from Britain and by Monday morning, two major American television networks had joined the fray.

The pursuit by reporters was relentless and Niamh's family were distraught. So too were the family of another young burns victim who was wrongly identified in a newspaper article as the world's first potential face transplant patient. That distressing expose was later the subject of court proceedings and a reputed six-figure payout.

The Sunday Times refused to identify the family, only my editors and I knew where Niamh lived, but within days she had been located and the family found themselves at the centre of a bidding war for Niamh's story. Sums in excess of stg£1m were bandied about, but the family, who were forced to engage lawyers to fend off the publicity, refused. Niamh wasn't for sale.

I watched from the sidelines with horror. My first "big scoop" should have been a cause for celebration. Instead, it brought me close to tears.

As soon as it started, it was all over. The hot-shot reporters headed home after it emerged that Niamh was unsuitable for the surgery and wouldn't be the world's first person to receive a face donated by a donor who had died less than four hours before the operation.

Shortly after Niamh's story died down, I wrote a letter to her mother, courtesy of the local parish priest, conveying my apologies for any distress I had caused and explaining my own distress at how events had unfolded. I explained that I was young and inexperienced and that I had never meant to turn their lives upside down.

Many months later, I received a call from Niamh's mother who said I must be a culchie because a city slicker would never dream of writing to a priest.

Niamh's mum had called to say thank-you, to reassure me that despite the negative impact the story had had on their lives, I was not to worry because she knew, by my letter, that I had acted with integrity.

It was around this time that I found myself playing with a box of matches, with *Is duaine cliu ná saoghal* inscribed on it.

It wasn't Watergate, but it was the first time that I fully realized the impact that reporters and the editors who hire them can have on people's lives.

I learned a lot from Niamh's story. I discovered the thrill of breaking an exclusive; a splash that had resonated on an international stage, being at the heart of a story that would later become a global phenomenon when last year Isabelle Dinoire, a French Para suicide victim, received the world's first ever partial face transplant.

But what I learnt most was the importance of integrity.

IF YOU ASK most journalists what professional integrity means, they reply that it means to be fair and objective and tell the truth. In legal parlance, it is the defence of justification. The truth, so the saying goes, will set you free.

Despite dismissive statements to the effect that ethical journalism is an oxymoron, I think most journalists value integrity and do their best to observe the requirements of objectivity, accuracy, corroboration of facts and steering clear of conflicts of interest.

These are not just lofty ideals. It is only through our professional integrity that we earn and retain our reader's trust.

When I think of what these virtues mean in practice, I usually recite in my mind the following standard journalism commandments encapsulated in many working codes.

IT runs something like this: Be honest, be fair. Don't lie or steal (especially other people's by-lines and ideas).

Accept no gifts, promise no favours and be aware of the real agenda behind any junkets that are thrown your way.

Be mindful of your power and your responsibility at all times.

Show compassion, mercy if needs be and discretion when it is appropriate. Learn to accept criticism. Admit your mistakes and be prepared to face the consequences - editorial, legal and most importantly, human - once you've made them.

In reality, acting with integrity is not as easy as it sounds and it takes a while for it to sink in that all of our professional decisions have an ethical dimension.

Some are dramatic and obvious and usually taken at a senior level such as the recent decision by Geraldine Kennedy, the editor of the Irish Times, who published confidential details that revealed Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach, received payments from friends and businessmen when he was minister for finance in the early 1990s.

But there is also an ethical dimension to the less dramatic, but I would argue equally important decisions that journalists are required to make every day.

Decisions such as who to interview, who to exclude. Who you quote and in what context, whose contribution you choose to omit. What angles that you choose to highlight in your story, what slant falls by the wayside.

Even in the most non controversial stories, as journalists we wield an enormous power over other people's perceptions.

I think these issues are particularly poignant for young journalists who by and large have no training in journalism ethics and law and in dealing with sources.

You don't learn good news judgment overnight and it is hard to get your head around grappling with difficult decisions on deadline.

From the beginning of their careers, young workers, especially those operating on a financially fraught freelance basis, feel enormous pressure to establish their by-lines.

They may wish to impress editors and in doing so unduly sensationalize stories that may in fact distort the truth.

In addition to the compulsion to secure a foothold in a given newsroom, young journalists succumb to the enormous pressure of competing with their peers and other titles.

This is especially so with the arrival of certain titles into the Irish market that have simultaneously raised the game and lowered the standards of Irish journalism as a whole.

Sometimes, it feels like a race to the bottom. It is not entirely our fault, consumers - as one media magnate has observed - are more promiscuous than ever before.

So where does that leave the young journalist? If you know another reporter is willing to bend the rules, our ethical codes, possibly the law, do you follow suit?

I know of few young hacks that have stood an editor down when they've been out scooped and defended that perceived failure on the basis of the integrity of their by-line, let alone cite the NUJ code of ethics.

As a result, it's not as easy as you might think to devise a professional and personal strategy to resist those very real pressures to cut corners or sensationalize your stories.

You might be willing to go the distance in order to demonstrate your skills and desire to be a good reporter, but what do you do when you've crossed the line?

What do you do when you're standing on the line and deciding whether or not to cross it?

IN general, if it feels wrong, it usually is, but is it ethical to perpetrate a wrong in order to expose an even greater one?

If it's illegal, that's usually a no-no, but what if you feel that it is worth taking that risk?

Why not ask the producers who made the Leas Cross report who successfully stood down a privacy action. Or ask those reporters who have broken the in camera rule to expose the failings of our family law system.

Or maybe ask Geraldine Kennedy who is facing a possible two-year jail sentence and a €300, 000 fine for exposing the Taoiseach's payments.

Ethical journalism, much like morality, is rarely black and white.

That is why integrity is critical, because it acts as a compass and support structure to guide you through the pitfalls.

There will be many ethical pitfalls that you embark on as a rookie reporter.

One example is the first time that you are sent on what is unfortunately termed "the death knock". The death knock entails visiting the home of a family who are experiencing intense personal grief, perhaps as a result of a horrific road accident, in the aftermath of a horrendous crime or when they are unwilling participants in a high profile murder or manslaughter trial.

No journal or guide book ever tells you how to approach a family in those circumstances; no editor can tell you what to say.

Often there is intense pressure to get the human interest angle and it is usually the new kids on the block who are sent to get it. It can be a difficult, but rewarding task and requires the utmost sensitivity.

These situations are fraught with difficulty and even when you do negotiate that first person interview, how do you handle it?

Do you abandon the story once you've got that first hit or do you have an obligation to go back and follow up on those people whose lives have been shattered?

I have a policy, where it is suitable, of checking in with those families once the crisis has subsided. They're often surprised, if not angry to hear from you and wary because they think you have a hidden agenda and want to secure more acres of newsprint.

When I explain that it is just a courtesy call, those barriers break down and they are grateful that their story hasn't been forgotten, even after the world has moved on.

It is because of that personal policy that I recently learned that Niamh has done exceptionally well in her leaving cert and has just started university.

ANOTHER major ethical roadblock is dealing with sources. Reporters are expected to develop and cultivate sources, this is especially so if you are assigned a beat or a correspondency.

But cultivating sources is a delicate task and proximity to sources is an ethical and sometimes legal landmine.

Sources take risks on your behalf and expose you to others. Like many journalists, I've been interviewed by senior gardai about alleged leaks from other senior gardai. I have been asked to co-operate with garda investigations and civil legal actions and have declined because of the need to protect my sources.

It sounds dramatic, but in truth, most sources aren't controversial. They can range from government ministers and their handlers right down to ordinary members of the public.

But handling sources does get difficult when they require a degree of protection, when they require anonymity.

Sometimes, to get a story, we have no other choice but to use them. This area is particularly fraught as there is no protection for reporter-source privilege in Irish law and the government is moving towards a regime of compelling journalists to reveal their sources.

There is a strong tradition in Ireland of relying on information provided by anonymous sources often on a spectrum of an off-the-record basis -which can place you in an ethical and legal quandary.

As any reporter or editor knows, significant political, medical, abuse, legal and financial scandals take weeks, months and sometimes years to surface. They require on the part of reporters the cultivation of contacts and earning the trust of individuals who stand to lose much by disclosure of their identity and other breaches of confidence.

They are people who are bound by their own moral, ethical, legal and professional codes not to disclose information, and yet they do because they cannot condone wrongdoing. They work in our hospitals, schools and banks; in our government departments, in parochial houses and in garda stations.

They are whistleblowers. Sometimes their intentions are sincere; sometimes they have an axe to grind and agendas to push.

They often sign confidentiality agreements and when the time comes, they break them. Most value privacy, but if the circumstances demand it, they breach it.

They are, in my opinion, the real heroes in democracies that pay only lip service to the public interest and the common good. When governments fillet official channels, as the Irish government did with the Freedom of Information Act, reporters and whistleblowers seek each other out.

Sometimes our investigations require covert surveillance and sometimes subterfuge.

Inevitably, unearthing a scandal of major public interest necessitates an invasion of privacy to some degree.

Investigations demand tenacity and doggedness from reporters, but under the government's proposed new privacy regime, much of our day-to-day journalistic activities may now be classified as either a civil or criminal wrong.

All of these ethical trapdoors strike at the heart of our professional integrity as working journalists and determine our behaviour.

Knowing when and how to make a stand on integrity is, I think, an intuitive thing, it goes beyond the technical requirements of the job.

IT is a very pertinent time to be discussing professional integrity and journalism ethics. We do so at a time when our government is attempting to sacrifice the freedom of the press, the public interest and the common good at the altar of privacy, whilst worshipping the false God of political self-interest.

Political opposition to media conduct has been brewing for some time. It reached a zenith following the coverage of the death of Liam Lawlor, the former Fianna Fáil TD. The result, Lawlor's legacy, is a proposed new privacy bill.

The stakes for investigative reporting and freedom of the press couldn't be higher. Under the proposed law, anything and everything might be construed – subjectively and objectively - as an unlawful invasion of privacy.

Legitimate journalistic investigations could be stymied by litigants with much to hide.

The bill has a newsgathering defence, but the new civil tort of privacy has deftly incorporated harassment and trespass into its remit. These acts are already dealt with in criminal statutes, therefore a new tort of privacy was effectively criminalising most

of what it is we journalists do, except plaintiffs and prosecutors have a lower burden of proof to satisfy.

The final nail in the coffin is that privacy applications may themselves be heard in private. The best defence against such a regime is retaining the highest possible standards. That is what we are exploring today.

To those of you starting out in your careers I would urge you to look at the broader picture, beyond the deadline, beyond the headlines.

Resist the temptation to compromise yourself, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Find your voice and in time use it to challenge decisions and situations that make you feel uncomfortable.

Examine your conscience, and ask why you are here, what led you to this vocation, because I firmly believe that is what journalism is. It is a lifestyle choice, not just a career.

If you want to be famous, join a reality show. If you want to make a difference, you have to look deep inside.

You have to strive to become a person of integrity.

Ends.