



## Global media ethics revisited

### A postcolonial critique

■ **Shakuntala Rao and Herman Wasserman**

*State University of New York at Plattsburgh, USA; University of Stellenbosch, South Africa*

#### ABSTRACT

Little theoretical work from non-Western perspectives has entered the epistemological discussion of universal ethical principles for media and journalism. The increased analysis of media globalization requires a closer examination of the ethical principles being advocated by media theorists. We use postcolonial theory to argue that advocates of universal media ethics need to take into account the history of colonialism, differences of powers between nations and peoples, and the importance of indigenous theory. We contend that in the non-Western world underlying conditions of postcoloniality and indigenous values influence how media professionals and journalists make ethical decisions. These interpretations present an epistemic challenge to dominant ethical concepts based primarily on Western Enlightenment philosophies. The article concludes with a discussion of two specific ethical theories, *ubuntu* from South Africa and *ahimsa* from India, which illustrate the importance of indigenous knowledge in the search for global media ethics.

#### KEY WORDS

*ahimsa* ■ ethics ■ globalization ■ media ■ postcolonial ■ *ubuntu* ■ universalism

### Introduction

This article has evolved out of, we believe, a necessary intervention in the development of universal ethical principles for media worldwide. With rapid globalization, the search for universal media ethics has recently become an important topic of scholarly debate. While several attempts have been made to incorporate ethical concepts from non-Western contexts into media and journalism ethics frameworks, these theoretical frameworks themselves remain largely unaltered. In this article, we argue that little theoretical work from non-Western perspectives

enters into the epistemological discussion of universal ethical principles that media professionals and journalists globally might use. We do not wish to argue that values articulated by Western theories (such as truth and non-violence) cannot transcend the cultural, geographic, or religious experiences in which they are situated and from which they emerge. Nor do we wish to construct a romantic view of precolonial cultures based on erroneous and static notions of culture that ignore syncretism with the West (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Spivak, 1988). We recognize that cultures are dynamic, that societies undergo hybridization and that their members display agency in appropriating Western ideas and values suited to their contexts. In providing a postcolonial critique, we argue that non-Western and indigenous epistemologies must be given the status of theory in the discussions about media and journalism ethics.

The literature review suggests that while scholars have consulted a wide range of cultures from outside Europe and North America, concepts from these cultures have been made to fit what essentially remains a Western theoretical framework. This is contra to the stated aim of scholars such as Christians who acknowledges that such '[u]niversal imperatives have been discredited' (2005: 3). We argue that the explorations of alternative ethical concepts from around the globe done thus far do not offer a viable theoretical framework in which to couch attempts at universality. The frameworks in which norms and values from non-Western contexts have been integrated are distinctly Western in origin, for example, the self-admittedly Western-based rationalist contractualism of Rawls and Scanlon in Ward (2005) or in the case of Christians and Nordenstreng's (2004) use of social responsibility theory. Some studies (e.g. Himmelboim and Limor, 2005) have taken a comparative approach to professional ethics worldwide by examining commonalities between ethical frameworks on professional or institutional levels. While their comparison of codes spans 94 countries around the world, their theoretical point of departure is functional approaches based on revisions of Siebert et al.'s (1974) 'Four Theories of the Press' model.

Christians is correct in stating that theories are 'oppositional claims about the world' (2005: 8). Yet, in much of the critical scholarship on global media ethics the political has been largely absent from the discussion. In this article we also want to introduce the political aspect of contesting theories and provide a theoretical framework in which such a debate can take place. By drawing on postcolonial theory, a critical approach, we want to highlight that cultures are enmeshed in power relations, and therefore an exploration of ethical values in non-

Western cultures would also have to account for these power relations on a theoretical level. Instead of reiterating the important injunctions against the uncritical adoption of 'immutable and universal imperatives' that 'have been generally invalidated' (Christians, 2005: 4) we want to offer alternative theoretical perspectives, because of their grounding in the cultural and historical conditions of the West.

Along with Christians and Traber, we ask,

Can theoretical models be developed that are explicitly cross-cultural? Can moral principles be identified that are universal within the splendid variety of human life? Will a multicultural comparative ethics replace the dominant canons, most of them North Atlantic and patriarchal? (1997: viii)

While critics such as Christians and Traber have rightly questioned the facile universalization of Western ethical ideologies, we use postcolonial theory, a perspective which represents a response to a genuine need, as Dirlik puts it, to 'overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world' (1994: 328). To understand ethical, political, and cultural universal principles, one needs to study the underlying conditions of postcoloniality to which such principles are to be applied and, subsequently, formulated within these contexts. This is not a plea for relativity, namely the assumption that 'the right and valid are only known in local space and native languages' (Christians, 2005: 5). We agree that the search for globally accepted values and the recognition of cultural specificity are not mutually exclusive, and our argument is not an attempt to re-open the one-versus-many debate (Christians, 2005: 10–11). However, the use of the term 'global' in debates about universal media ethics is often limited, displaying a lack of adequate attention to cultural difference around the world that may problematize the very notion of 'global ethics'.

This article illustrates, via two specific ethical theories from South Africa and India, that indigenous knowledge complicates the search for universal principles among journalists and media professionals and necessitates a rethink of Western theoretical frameworks, especially when they carry assumptions inherited from liberal or Enlightenment thinking. The focus in the article will fall on journalism, and will, due to a lack of space, not cover areas of media production, distribution and consumption, although these areas also lend themselves to critical analysis along similar lines.

### Current research on global media ethics

We first turn to the various efforts in the field of communication to develop global media ethics. In one attempt to formulate universal ethics, the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* published a special issue in 2003 titled 'Search for a Global Media Ethics'. One of the authors in this issue writes that the profession's global scope and transnational media forces the question of whether there can be 'universal ethical standards for journalism to meet the challenges of globalization' (Callahan, 2003: 3). Similarly, Ward states that a global media ethics would imply that responsibility 'would be owed to an audience scattered across the world' (2005: 4), a development resulting from the increasingly global reach of media corporations facilitated through new technologies.

Various thinkers have critiqued notions that Western values should or can be easily transposed to other cultures and nations. Critiquing attempts in the 1990s to establish democratic media systems in the former Soviet Union, Brislin also hesitates to universalize Western values, pointing to the wrong assumption that underlay much of these attempts, namely 'the belief of the universal portability of Western values' (2004: 132). Brislin suggests a new focus in the search for universal media ethics, namely that of 'empowerment', which he defines as 'the degree to which a society's journalism is designed to empower the citizenry for its own betterment rather than the degree to which it creates a passive audience of consumerism' (2004: 130). More recently, Christians and Nordenstreng have proposed a theoretical formulation which re-examines the search for global media ethics, and proposes the social responsibility theory as a possibility for the press to adopt internationally. They state that social responsibility theory has 'become a worldwide phenomenon' and its ethical basis needs to be 'articulated in global terms' (2004: 13). They offer the possibility of establishing several universal principles which they ground in 'a morality rooted in animate nature' (2004: 20). Stating that 'global social responsibility needs an ethical basis commensurate in scope, that is, universal ethical principles rather than the parochial moral guidelines represented by codes', Christians and Nordenstreng list respect for human dignity (based on the sacredness of human life), truth, and non-violence as three universal principles (2004: 20). In his attempt to adopt 'a cosmopolitan attitude', Ward also formulates three philosophical foundations for a global media ethics: credibility, justifiable consequence, and humanity. These principles are linked 'to act as a global agent, to serve world citizens, and to enhance non-parochial understandings' (2004: 3).

One can argue that the modern media are Western in origin and ethical theories one suggests for the media are bound to be those that emerge from the West. However, satellite news channels such as Al Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Zee News have proven that the traditionally cherished Western values of journalism are no longer viable in global journalism. The media, like democracy, is no longer just Euro-American. The complicated social and cultural composition of globalization makes it difficult to sustain a simple equation between capitalist modernity, Eurocentric cultural values and political forms. For example, the most important consequence of globalization and transnationalization is that, for the first time in the history of democracy, the democratic mode, divorced from its historically specific origins in Europe, appears as a global phenomenon. The narrative of democracy is no longer a narrative of the history of Europe; non-European democratic societies now make their own claims of the history of democracy. However, as is the case with the discourse of 'human rights' (also seen by ethicists like Hamelink as universally accepted, cf. Christians, 2005: 6), the normative frameworks of liberal democracy cannot be unproblematically applied to contexts outside of the West. In Africa, for example, globalization has involved the importation of liberal democratic value systems, including discourses of human rights that are at odds with local realities (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Nyamnjoh and Englund, 2004).

The origins of social responsibility theory, seen by Christians and Nordenstreng as a basis for global media ethics, are firmly intertwined with Western notions of liberal democracy and media professionalism (Nerone, 1995: 99–100). Christians and Nordenstreng interpret social responsibility from a communitarian point of view which is a more tempered position than conservative takes on this theory. They also integrate examples from various parts of the world to build a media philosophy which is 'very transnational' (Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004: 6). Though this interpretation of social responsibility theory is more transformational, we want to argue that ethical theories from post-colonial contexts may indeed problematize the core values of social responsibility theory as it has been understood in the debate until now. This, in our opinion, calls for a reconsideration of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the quest for global media ethics.

While attempts to find universal ethical values stem from the impetus of globalization, there is a general realization that all attempts to universalize have to take into account local practices of culture and politics. Christians (2005: 7) rightly asserts that 'universalist theories have discredited themselves over history by breeding totalitarianism'.

We agree with Brislin's (2004) observation that cultural specificity should not mean that the search for a universal media ethic in the face of globalization should be abandoned, but, we further argue, that indigenous theories should not be forced into a framework that is supposedly universal but has been, in fact, developed from specific Enlightenment philosophies.

We wish to extend the philosophical path that Christians and Nordenstreng, Brislin and others have taken to suggest that ethical theorists acknowledge that all theories have developed in response to certain historical and political conditions including those from the West. For this reason, we propose that postcolonial theory be used as a framework within which local practices, values, and concepts from outside the West may be explored. The strength of postcolonial theory is that it provides us with a critical framework that validates the local epistemologies necessary for the formulation of global ethics, and acknowledges the unequal power relationships in which various cultures and nations are historically positioned. A search for global ethics from the perspective of postcolonial theory will therefore see local cultures within broader histories of colonialism and nationalism, and will be attentive to the ways in which local values and cultures may resist easy incorporation into Western frameworks. We illustrate how this resistance takes place by offering two theoretical examples, from South Africa and India respectively.

### **Postcolonial theory and media ethics**

In this section we offer an overview of ways postcolonial theory can enhance discussions in global media and journalism ethics. Postcolonial theory has emerged as a diverse interdisciplinary critique, in fields such as anthropology, comparative literature, and history. At the most temporal level postcolonialism denotes the actual dismantling of colonialism, in the shape of the European overseas empires, and the less immediately perceptible effect of continued globalization of the capitalist modes of production and their penetration of previously non-capitalist regions of the world (Asad and Dixon, 1986; Young, 2001). Most fundamentally, postcolonial theorists argue that, while contemporary liberal theorists show a capacity for dealing with, in Bloch's (1986) phrase, 'the non-synchronous experiences of Europe's Other', they uniformly avoid discussing the relationship between European colonialism and these variously constituted and articulated knowledges. In other words, liberal ethicists have not performed an epistemological

critique of the representations and modes of perceptions that Western historicism produces. 'The greats and models of historian's enterprise are at least culturally "European"', writes Chakrabarty (1996: 224). "'They" produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that "we" cannot return.' Calling this imbalance the 'inequality of ignorance' (1996: 224), Chakrabarty hopes that postcolonial theorists problematize Western theories that embrace the entirety of humanity without paying much attention to the historical, cultural, and political nature of that humanity.

Postcolonial theorists want to study a new period, what Tiffin (1995: 95) categorizes as a 'continuous postcoloniality'. Continuous postcoloniality focuses on the inter-connection between the histories of metropolis and peripheries in postcolonial international relations, to problematize the simple binary of colonizer-colonized and study the relationship between colonizer and colonized as deeply characterized by ambivalence. Tiffin writes, 'Decolonization is an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centers systems and peripheral subversion of them' (1995: 95). Without assuming that postcolonial discourses only emerge as a response to, and in (friendly or antagonistic) dialogue with, Western knowledge/power, Tiffin writes, 'emergent anti-colonial and post-colonial cultural and theoretical discourses were formed as much through transnational dialogues with other Third World discourses and movements as it was through dialogue with the West' (1995: 97). The search is not for, in Chow's (1992: 151) terms, 'endangered authenticities' (the pure native and/or the precolonial state to which one can supposedly return) but rather for producing a discourse 'free from colonial reminiscing or, more important, developing an indigenous economic and political model that is able to address local concerns' (Bahri, 2001: 143).

The nature of truth, postcolonial theorists argue, needs to be understood within the framework in which the truth is constructed and from which the truth emerges. According to Said, 'a presentation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth" which is itself a representation' (1978: 272). Postcolonial theorists, vastly influenced by Foucault's notion of discursive truth, view every action and every historical event as an exercise in the exchange of power. In this encounter, truth is not seen as being outside power, or lacking in power itself. Foucault says,

truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of

constraint. And it includes regular effects of power. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. (1980: 110)

Power produces 'regimes of truth'. As Foucault writes, '[power] circulates, it is never monopolized by one centre – it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourses' (1980: 120). Postcolonial theory alerts us to the fact that theory itself should not be seen as ideologically neutral, and that theoretical truth is always already positioned within networks of power. Postcolonialism therefore does not claim neutrality or scientific objectivity, but aims to critique existing forms of knowledge and the circumstances of its production. It should therefore be seen as a scholarly approach that positions itself as an ethical enterprise (McEwan, 2003).

Postcolonial theorists have questioned the absence of non-Western theories within academic disciplines, both within and outside of the West. Historically, the content of theories have been articulated in such a way that the 'other as theory has been silenced' (Pillai, 1993: 38). Shiva formulates the notion of 'West as theory, East as evidence' (1989: 118) which often assumes in theorizing that evidence (non-Western texts and subjects) is to be disembodied from theory. This further assumes the autonomy of theory (West) and evidence (East) and hence reintroduces the West as the unified and privileged subject of theory. Remaining intact is what Chakrabarty has called a 'theoretical skeleton' (1996: 227) which continues to be Western in its assumptions and understanding of realities. Thus, concepts such as *dharma* or *ahimsa* from Indian philosophy, for instance, are used as evidence to construct and validate larger notions of social responsibility theory (e.g. Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004). *Dharma* and *ahimsa* do not attain the privileged position of theory but are relegated to evidentiary materials. Such assumptions neither allow a space for indigenous interpretations and knowledges where such concepts can be seen as theories nor are they allowed to travel across space and time with the same fluidity as Western theories (Clifford, 1997). A discussion of indigenous theorizing often falls into the danger of what scholars like Nandy have called 'advocacy of a return to tradition, to a largely fantasized pre-modern' (1987: 22). Postcolonialists take a dialectic view of indigeneity to say that giving epistemic respect and space to concepts such as *dharma* and *ahimsa* is not a return to an 'imaginary pure' but rather an acknowledgment of the repertoire from which postcolonial peoples and cultures draw meaning.



Within communication and media studies, Shome and Hegde (2002b: 260) have asked the question as to how scholars can begin to form productive intellectual alliances between postcolonial theory and the communication discipline? Calling for an end to 'parochialism of theory steeped in Eurocentrism' (2002b: 265), Shome and Hegde ask for a rethink in areas such as representation, identity, hybridity, and agency. By promoting theoretical flexibility, they urge scholars to require not simply a 'historical explanation of colonialism' but a rigorous re-examination of the philosophical and political impulse which drives our modes of inquiry. In the same vein, Shohat and Stam too have asked media scholars to engage in a project that 'calls for revisioning of world history', not as a celebratory form of 'national/ethnic narcissism' but rather articulated in intellectual terms together with a 'critique of Eurocentric modes of thought as a substratal set of axioms undergirding conventional ways of mapping history and society' (2003: 7–8). Such theory would move beyond seeing the West as the 'world's center of gravity, as ontological reality to the rest of the world's shadow, as the originary fountain' (2003: 8).

A postcolonial perspective to universal media ethics will imply approaching the search for global ethics not from the position of dominance but from the margins of globalization. As such, a postcolonial approach to media ethics will introduce a radical critique of unequal power relationships between discourses. Postcolonialism is an attempt not merely to describe these power inequalities, but also to change them. Local differences should form the basis of such a resistance to the homogenizing impulses of universalization. A postcolonial approach does not merely want to introduce more voices to the debate on global ethics so as to give everyone a chance to speak in the hope of arriving at a 'cosmopolitan' or 'international perspective' as Ward (2005: 6) suggests. Postcolonial critique is concerned with social change and the disruption of patterns of power, not merely with the incorporation of different points of view in order to reach consensus by way of a 'contractual deliberation by interested parties' (Ward, 2005: 9).

Media ethicists thus should not overlook some of the complexities and challenges any kind of moral theory faces whenever transplanted to a global context – a vast range across many different cultures, religious, and socio-political practices and ways of life that may in fact contradict or undermine each other. Even the relatively flexible social responsibility theory runs into roadblocks when thought of in global terms. The concept of the sacred status of human life advocated by social responsibility theory, for instance, operates much differently in India than in the

United States. In Indian societies not all life is equally sacred. Sometimes death is more sacred than life. Indian feminists have argued that the practice of widow-burning or *sati* in India cannot simply be understood as Third World patriarchal oppression, but can rather be viewed as a voluntary act of self-immolation in a culture where a woman's virtue is pre-determined by her self-sacrificing abilities (Karlekar, 1995; Katrak, 1992). While there have been cases where women have been forced to practice *sati* because of socio-economic pressures, Indian feminists have critiqued the West's reductive reading of *sati* as merely an act of Third World patriarchy and outside the debates of women's agency and free will. Sita, for instance, the heroine in the epic *Ramayana*, performs self-immolation to prove her virtue as a good wife and a good mother. Sita's symbolic image was later adopted by Gandhi in defining the role of women in India's independence movement (Rao, 1999). We cannot unequivocally qualify such practices as immoral, but must carefully analyze them within the specific historical and cultural conditions in which they function. Accepting the Indian concept of 'life' might mean upsetting the dominant understanding of the universal principle of the sacredness of life.

In many African societies, the concept of human life is further complicated by the view of the world as being shared by the living and the dead. The actions of the living have an impact on the dead; similarly, the behavior of the dead affects the living. Ethical actions, therefore, are those that serve a community comprised of the living and the dead. Responsibility for action lies not only with the living, but also with the dead – since the living and the dead influence each other's actions, the living alone cannot bear responsibility for their actions (Kasoma, 2005: 345–7). In these African contexts, respect for human life also entails, indivisibly, respect for the dead, and this has implications for the ways responsibility and accountability need to be understood.

'Truth' too is culturally mediated and constructed. The concept of *dharma*, an example used by Christians and Nordenstreng, from the *Bhagwat Gita* and *Upanishads* in Hinduism, has many interpretative connotations. In fact, Gandhi's translation of the *Bhagwat Gita* suggests that *dharma* may mean 'seekers of true divinity' (Gandhi, 1924: 199) and that *dharma* (as truth) is a state of being, not an act such as truth-telling as defined by Christians and Nordenstreng. Gandhi writes that the text of the *Bhagwat Gita* is inconsistent about the primacy of any one way to achieve *dharma* (1924: 99), and in the religious epic *Mahabharata*, *dharma* is portrayed as righteousness which is more important than

telling a truth. Thus, within Hinduism, many different sects have evolved, emphasizing different aspects of *dharma* (Gupta, 2000).

Like the concept of 'truth', a concept such as 'empowerment' suggested by Brislin (2004) as a possible universal ethics, too, will be interpreted within political and institutional contexts. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa mention of the word 'empowerment' will in all probability activate a discourse that has become dominant: a discourse of redress of inequalities inherited from the apartheid era and 'black economic empowerment', a policy initiated by the post-apartheid government. The policy encourages businesses to appoint black partners to the boards of directors, or to work towards the equitable spread of resources across racial divisions. Media companies have to comply with racial quotas in order to increase racial diversity. Using empowerment as an ethical value may imply that media organizations and editorial staff must restructure, and pay attention to issues of racial representation in both staffing and content. While, from a postcolonial perspective, such redress would be seen as an ethical imperative given the history of racial oppression in which the South African media was largely complicit, usage of the term in contemporary South Africa might differ significantly from the way that it is interpreted in Western, liberal, social responsibility discourses. The only way for a concept such as empowerment to be universalized, therefore, would be to accept that social groups exist globally in varying and unequal power relationships (Shepperson and Tomaselli, 2002: 282). This would suggest that even universal values such as empowerment will remain subject to re-interpretation along historical, cultural, political, and economic lines (Tomaselli and Shepperson, 1997).

Following the theoretical contributions of postcoloniality to a critique of universalism, we discuss two ethical theories from South Africa and India. These nations share a history of colonialism and, with rapid globalization, find themselves trying to forge new national and political postcolonial identities. They also find themselves on the margins of dominant global discourses driven by powerful actors of the West. The assertion of local knowledges, traditions, and values runs parallel to the increasing spread of Western ideas. Media ethics in these countries no longer fit neatly into the classic Western liberal frameworks of ethics. The two theories we discuss below, *ubuntu* and *ahimsa*, challenge attempts at universalizations which are not cognizant of colonial history and unequal power relations between peoples and nations.

### ***Ubuntu* in South African media**

In the South African context, an ethical framework such as *ubuntu* offers another view of truth, justice, and authority based on collective consciousness. This framework, based on African thought, provides a cultural interpretation of an ethical principle such as human dignity as understood within the parameters of Western and liberal theories. *Ubuntu* is derived from the proverb that 'each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others' (Broodryk quoted in Louw and Schenck, 2002: 97). This concept is derived from the expression 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu', meaning, in short: 'I am a person through other persons', or 'I am because of others' (Blankenberg, 1999: 46). This communitarian principle of 'I am because we are' can also be noted in other African societies (Moemeka, 1997: 174). *Ubuntu* can be likened to a communitarian ethic in which the values of the community form the basis of ethical decision-making and the individual and community is interdependent (Christians, 2004). The re-appreciation of a value system such as *ubuntu* forms part of the renegotiation of cultural identities in post-apartheid South Africa. Since this involves a reaction against the Western cultural frameworks that dominated during apartheid, this rediscovery of African values can be seen as a post-colonial process.

While South Africans focussed on reconciliation immediately after the end of apartheid, they have since shifted their attention to a discourse of Africanization (Steenveld, 2004). President Thabo Mbeki's vision of an 'African Renaissance' and his attempts to forge better links between African states as part of the 'New Partnership for Africa's Development' (NEPAD) place emphasis on the incorporation of African values into normative media frameworks. In several of his public rebukes of, and appeals to, the media, Mbeki has argued for a more 'Africanist' orientation among members of the media, and has criticized the media for perpetuating colonial stereotypes of Africans (Mbeki, 2003). These debates about the media's role in South Africa also became cultural debates about the renegotiation of post-apartheid identities (Wasserman, 2003).

If *ubuntu* is to be used as a normative theory for the media, the media as an institution should be seen as inextricably linked with the community, and should be required to actively participate in community matters through consultation (Blankenberg, 1999: 46–50). This would mean that ethical principles would be conceived from within the community and not somehow outside of it. The community itself would

not be conceived of as a collective of individuals, but as an organism in which members have reciprocal relationships. Universal principles such as respect for human dignity might be given quite a different slant in the process, since dignity would be understood not only as an individual attribute, but also a community's. In the South African sense, particular communities have been systematically robbed of their dignity as part of apartheid's disregard for human rights. *Ubuntu* might require the media to encourage communal redress. Such an imperative would differ from the dominant Western and liberal-democratic principle that respects individual dignity before group interests. It would also go against the way that social responsibility is currently viewed in many (Western-influenced) ethical codes in the mainstream South African media itself, since it would require the media to actively seek out ways of bridging persistent racial, economic and ethnic divides, instead of merely avoiding offense as is currently the case.

Human dignity is conceived differently by Western and African normative frameworks, as can be seen in the case study of a South African government official's death due to HIV/AIDS related illness. On 26 October 2000, Parks Mankahlana, the spokesperson for President Mbeki and formerly for President Nelson Mandela, died. While the cause of his death was not officially disclosed, it was widely speculated in the media that it was a result of AIDS, despite denials from his family. His wife explained his death as having been caused by acute anemia followed by a heart attack. The President, who declined to comment on Mankahlana's illness, said that it was a family matter (Barrell, 2000; Louw, 2000; Wasserman and De Beer, 2004). The media was widely criticized for having speculated about his death, and a complaint was lodged with an independent media watchdog, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (BCCSA), against the television network, e.tv. In a broadcast e.tv had quoted ANC (African National Congress) sources confirming that Mankahlana had died of AIDS-related complications. The BCCSA justified e.tv's broadcast by saying a dead person had no right to privacy or dignity under the law. It further argued that, in his public role as a spokesperson, Mankahlana had been responsible for formulating the president's reply to tough media questions about, among other issues, the President's controversial HIV/AIDS policy and his denial of the causal link between HIV and AIDS (Louw, 2000: 244). Mankahlana himself was also responsible for some contentious statements, including one in which he justified the policy of the South African government when it refused to give drugs to HIV-positive mothers, because orphans might place an undue financial burden on the state.

This debate illustrated how, even within one country, there exist conflicting conceptions of the supposedly universal principles of human dignity and truth. Exponents of liberal frameworks justified media speculations about the cause of Mankahlana's death from the point of view that truth is a fundamental ethical value in a normative framework premised on the right to freedom of expression. They advocated disclosure, claiming that they were upholding 'universal news values' (Louw, 2000). Some journalists argued that Mankahlana's death was a political rather than a private matter and that disclosure would benefit the citizenry at large. The opposing point of view, articulated by advocates for African values, was that death should be dealt with privately and within the confines of a specific community (Kindra, 2002). The values and interests of this section of the Black South African community differed from the interests pursued by the mainstream media. The view of truth, justice, and authority arising from collective consciousness is in line with the relational view of subjectivity found in *ubuntu* philosophy. According to this view, Mankahlana's humanity cannot be seen separately from that of the whole community, and disclosure of the cause of his death would affect the community at large. The Black South African community strongly reacted against disclosure; they thought the justification for divulging the cause of Mankahlana's death as related to AIDS could not be based upon his role as a public individual with a political role. Rather, the truth about Mankahlana's death would have to be negotiated within a community, incorporating African values such as respect for the dead. The normative framework of *ubuntu* would also mean that the universal value of human dignity could not be seen purely in individual terms. Rather, the human dignity of members of the Black South African community, a dignity that was threatened by stereotypes connecting HIV/AIDS to race, had to be taken into account. In the case of Parks Mankahlana, universal values such as truth and human dignity were articulated in terms of cultural and racial differences (Louw, 2000; Shepperson and Tomaselli, 2002: 283). This case also illustrates the multicultural nature of states and the weakening of pre-existing notions of the nation-state. If globalization provides the context for a search for universal ethical values, it should also underline the need for a plurality of ethical frameworks, based on the diversity of communities and cultures within countries themselves (Tomaselli and Shepperson, 1997: 279).

Debates about media ethics in South Africa illustrate that ethical universality cannot be automatically assumed when one considers concepts such as human dignity and truth-telling. Instead, the theoretical

specificity of these concepts should be engaged in their own terms, and universality should not be imposed on local contexts, but should emerge from these contexts. This is especially true in the postcolonial context of South Africa, where media ethics remains a contested terrain because of varied and unequally powerful cultural and political histories.

### **Ahimsa in Indian media**

Just as ethical values of truth-telling and respect for human dignity are complicated by the concept of *ubuntu*, the Western interpretation of non-violence can be challenged when the principle is used in the Indian context. Christians and Nordenstreng's universal principle uses the term *ahimsa* (from Hinduism), defined as 'non-violence', from which the ethical obligation of 'no harm to the innocent' (2004: 23) is formulated. Such a definition, and the term itself, requires further analysis. *Ahimsa* has a long history in the Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu philosophies. We limit our discussion here to its interpretation as used by Gandhi and its influence on contemporary Indian media.

Gandhi has become an important figure in the understanding of postcolonial identity and politics because of the significant role he played in mobilizing non-violent social movements around the world. Unlike his contemporaries, Gandhi constructed an 'eccentric subject position' (Young, 2001: 321) always locating himself at the outer limits of marginalization and social exclusion, a radical declaration against elitism and orthodox politics alike. Gandhi developed his own theory of *ahimsa* by freely borrowing ideas from Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian philosophies (Hay, 1970; Parekh, 1989; Sharma, 2001). He translates *ahimsa* as the highest expression of *abhayadanam*, which means not only abstention from harming others, but also the absence of a wish or desire to harm and involves *veratyaga* (renunciation of the feeling of enmity) or *avera* (an attitude of non-enmity). Gandhi defines *ahimsa* as 'absence of malice or hostility to all living beings in every way and at all times' (Gandhi, 1942: 18). Unlike the Hindu philosophers before him, who viewed *ahimsa* negatively, Gandhi began formulating his theory of *ahimsa* by thinking that it was a positive term that needed to be applied in a proactive manner to philosophy, politics, and everyday living. In that sense, he challenged and transformed the pre-existing notions that gave primacy to *himsa* (violence). For Gandhi, *himsa* meant inflicting harm or destruction upon another living being out of selfishness or ill will. In the Indian tradition, harm was defined widely to include not only physical but also psychological, moral, and other forms



of *klesa* (pain). Accepting this broad definition, Gandhi viewed *himsa* as not only physical harm which would involve harming or killing a person or denying him or her the basic necessities of life, but as also encompassing insulting, humiliating, diminishing another's self-respect, speaking harsh words, and passing harsh judgments (1942: 33). For Gandhi, violence could be manifested not only in conduct, but also in thought. Ancient Indian philosophers argued that a person could be guilty of violence by committing it himself (*krita*), aiding and instigating it (*karita*) or by watching it being committed upon others without protest (*anumodita*). Gandhi went further and contended that a person also committed violence by participating and benefiting from a harmful practice. Unlike Indian philosophers, however, Gandhi used *ahimsa* to include active love, goodwill, taking care of nature and animals and doing all in one's power to alleviate human and non-human suffering (1942: 31).

Viewing *ahimsa* as a 'performative, active opposition' (Young, 2001: 324) to the violence committed by the British colonialists, Gandhi worked *ahimsa* as a perpetual dialectic, a positive force against the negative *himsa*. His broad view of *ahimsa* would challenge a single notion of the innocent or guilty. When Gandhi urged Indians to embark on the non-cooperation movement by boycotting clothes made in England, he was challenged by others to justify harming the livelihood of the 'innocent' mill workers of Lancashire and Manchester (Parekh, 1989: 37). Gandhi argued that though he had enormous sympathy for the mill workers, he had no intent to harm them. Indians might be required, Gandhi argued, to sacrifice their self-interest (in this case, saving their indigenous industries) if they were bound by an implicit or explicit duty to protect the interest of the mill workers at all costs, but, because they were imposed and maintained by violence, the trade agreements between the two nations could never generate a moral obligation on the part of the Indians toward the mill workers. Gandhi did not believe that all kinds of harms were 'morally asymmetrical' (Parekh, 1989: 38); those who are oppressed, when they rise up against their oppressors, cause harm to the interests of those oppressing and such harm is necessary and defensible. If the *adivasis* (tribals) who have been historically marginalized were to rise up against the Indian state, the state does not become the innocent victim of *himsa*.

Gandhi's philosophy of *ahimsa* has strongly influenced media in India especially since Gandhi was well recognized as a journalist and a formidable political force in the subcontinent. He started four major news weeklies in his life-time, *Indian Opinion* in South Africa and *Young*



*India, Harijan, and Navjivan* in India (Iyenger, 2001; Wolpert, 2001). In these newspapers Gandhi would often write columns expressing his views on media, politics, and philosophy. His views of *ahimsa* were thus fully integrated into the kind of Indian journalism which evolved during and after the Independence movement. Scholars agree that it is Gandhi's ethics of *ahimsa*, compared to *ahimsa* found in the classical Indian texts of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, which have been more widely practiced in postcolonial India (Chavan, 2001; Roy, 1985). Gandhi's popularity, as Nandy (1987: 26) has eloquently presented, was based on Gandhi's 'hybrid mode' where he was able to borrow from, and mesh together, different religions, philosophies, and ideas, to produce something unique to counter oppression and injustice.

One of the most contentious issues in Indian media has been the representation of religious minorities. After the end of British colonialism, and the division of the Indian subcontinent into two nations, Pakistan (with a Muslim majority and an Islamic constitution) and India (with a Hindu majority and a secular constitution), the issues of majority-minority relationships have been particularly divisive and violent. More than one million Indians, mostly minorities, have died in various religious riots since India's independence and partition in 1947. Given this scenario, the regional and vernacular press has adopted the positive and proactive notion of Gandhian *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa*, for these newspapers, means adopting an active and radically different approach to news. The focus of news stories becomes the advocacy of communal harmony between the majority Hindus and the minority Muslim, Sikh, and Christian communities. This approach doesn't fit into traditional Western approaches to journalism which are grounded on principles of objectivity, independence, and impartiality. For example, *The Tribune*, a newspaper based in Chandigarh in the state of Punjab, has for the past few years published many stories that show 'brotherly love' between religious communities, including stories that depict connections between Punjabi families in East Punjab (India) and West Punjab (Pakistan). One of their most successful news series has covered Pakistani visitors who have come back to Punjab for the first time since Punjab was partitioned. Often, such visitors are Muslims who visit friends and family, both Muslims and Hindus. The news stories highlight the meetings of the families and trace their life histories. H.K. Dua (2005), the editor-in-chief of *The Tribune*, advocates stories about communal harmony for the 'greater good of cross-border relationship'. Dua and other editors take a moral position: to advocate peace between communities. Their style of journalism, influenced by Gandhian *ahimsa*, allows

them to go beyond simply reporting the happenings of the day, to write about cooperation and harmony. The concept of *ahimsa*, in this case, cannot be understood as 'no harm to the innocent' but as a larger discourse which includes friendship, non-enmity, and love. As India struggles with its postcolonial national identity, Indian journalists are considering an indigenous value such as *ahimsa*, translated through their own cultural and political experiences, to address local issues. *Ahimsa* challenges the notion of a universal value based exclusively on non-violence. Instead, it shows the complex ways in which harm, no harm, violence, or innocence can be interpreted when applied within different cultural and historical contexts.

### **Conclusion**

While Christians and Nordenstreng, Brislin, and others have made justified attempts to expand universal principles to include non-Western perspectives, a postcolonial approach takes the debate further. In our analysis of *ubuntu* and *ahimsa*, we show that non-Western indigenous theories and complexities of postcolonial identities need to be integrated into a discussion of global media ethics. *Ubuntu* and *ahimsa* are examples of indigenous theories that often help analyze local issues best. We believe that one cannot fit *ubuntu* or *ahimsa* neatly into any global media ethics framework unless one acknowledges the influence of colonialism and the importance of indigenous theories in postcolonial cultures such as South Africa and India. While we support attempts that have thus far been made to incorporate ethical values and concepts from non-Western contexts into the debate about global media ethics, we argue that the overarching framework into which these concepts have been imported remains Western. To this end, we explored postcolonial theory as a critical approach that provides us with tools of self-reflexivity. The postcolonial response can also be seen as a political challenge to the power relations inherent in the process of globalization. We problematize easy incorporation of non-Western theories into Western discourses. Such problematization could be valuable in taking the debate about global media ethics further, since it would create a critical dialectic between the margins and the centers of Western globalization. Ethical values such as truth-telling, no harm to the innocent, empowerment and human dignity, among others, need to be examined and, if necessary, re-interpreted depending on the context and culture to which they are being applied.

Engaging in analyses of globalization, Shome and Hegde tell us, requires communication scholars to pay attention to the social, cultural, and political ramifications of the 'connections' enabled by globalization (2002a: 181). 'The euphoric global reality leaves unaccounted configurations of power', they write, 'the global erasures and silences' (2002a: 187). Asking for a 'theoretical openness' is therefore not a search for relativism but rather for 'theoretical pliability' (2002a: 185). Aside from using non-Western indigenous theories in non-Western contexts, theories such as *ubuntu* and *ahimsa* need to find a theoretical space among Western media professionals, just as integrating elements of social responsibility theory can benefit non-Western media professionals. Such efforts would result in true theoretical syncretism and engagement.

Media globalization may require standards for ethics on a global scale. Globalization, however, has also brought an increased realization of cultural diversity, both globally and within particular nations. While the debate around universal media ethics has displayed a sensitivity for this problematic, a theoretical foundation upon which a more pluralistic search for global ethics may be found has yet escaped critical debate. We hope to have suggested a theoretical approach that would be applicable across different contexts while preventing unequal relationships of symbolic and material power to be replicated.

### Note

The authors wish to thank Dr Erin Mitchell for comments and suggestion. A version of this paper was presented at the International Communication Association conference in New York on 26 May 2005.

### References

- Asad, T. and Dixon, J. (1986) 'Translating Europe's Other', in F. Barker et al. (eds) *Europe and its Others*, pp. 170–7. Colchester: University of Essex Press.
- Bahri, D. (2001) 'Coming to Terms with the Postcolonial', in D. Bahri and M. Vasudeva (eds) *Between the Lines: Postcoloniality and South Asians*, pp. 135–63. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Barrell, H. (2000) 'Parks: Presidency Silent on HIV/AIDS', *The Mail and Guardian*, 7 October, URL (consulted April 2003): <http://www.mg.co.za>
- Blankenberg, N. (1999) 'In Search of a Real Freedom: *Ubuntu* and the Media', *Critical Arts* 13(2): 42–65.
- Bloch, E. (1986) *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Brislin, T. (2004) 'Empowerment as a Universal Ethic in Global Journalism', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19(2): 130–7.
- Callahan, S. (2003) 'New Challenges of Globalization for Journalism', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 18(1): 3–15.

- Chakrabarty, D. (1996) 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', in P. Mongia (ed.) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, pp. 224–46. London: Arnold.
- Chavan, S. (ed.) (2001) *Mahatma Gandhi: Man of the Millennium*. New Delhi: Authors Press.
- Chow, R. (1992) 'Between Colonizers: Hong Kong Post-Colonial Self-Writing in the 1990s', *Diaspora* 2(2): 151–70.
- Christians, C. (2004) 'Ubuntu and Communitarianism in Media Ethics', *Ecquid Novi* 25(1): 235–56.
- Christians, C. (2005) 'Ethical Theory in Communications Research', *Journalism Studies* 6(1): 3–14.
- Christians, C. and Nordenstreng, K. (2004) 'Social Responsibility Worldwide', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19(1): 3–28.
- Christians, C. and Traber, M. (eds) (1997) *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clifford, J. (1997) *Routes: Travel and Translation in the 20th Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dirlik, A. (1994) 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry* 20: 328–55.
- Dua, H.K. (2005) Personal communication, 12 March.
- Foucault, M. (1980) 'Truth and Power: Interview by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino', in C. Gordon (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, pp. 109–22. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gandhi, M.K. (trans.) (1924) *Bhagwat Gita*. Ahmedabad: Nataraja Books.
- Gandhi, M.K. (1942) *Non-violence in Peace and War*. Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishers.
- Hay, S.H. (1970) *Gandhi and the World*. Delhi: Nachiketa Publishers.
- Himmelboim, I. and Limor, Y. (2005) 'The Journalistic Societal Role: An International Comparative Study of 242 Codes of Ethics', presentation at the International Communication Association, New York, June.
- Iyengar, A.S. (2001) *Role of Press and Indian Freedom Struggle: All Through the Gandhian Era*. New Delhi: Authors Press.
- Karlekar, M. (1995) 'The Relevance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Contemporary Perspective', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2(1): 45–65.
- Kasoma, F. (2005) 'An African Perspective of Ethics', in F. Nel (ed.) *Writing for the Media in South Africa*, pp. 345–8. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Katrak, K. (1992) 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian Satyagraha, and Representations of Female Sexuality', in A. Parker et al. (eds) *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, pp. 321–43. New York: Routledge.
- Kindra, J. (2002) 'AIDS Drugs Killed Parks, say ANC', *The Mail and Guardian*, 22 March, URL (consulted April 2003): <http://www.mg.co.za>
- Louw, R. (2000) 'The Death of Parks Mankahlana and the Question of Universal News Values', *Ecquid Novi* 21(2): 243–9.
- Louw, H.R. and Schenck, R. (2002) 'Learning Through Rediscovery and Reclaiming Local/Indigenous Knowledge and Skills', *Africanus* 32(2): 93–108.
- Mbeki, T. (2003) Address at the South African National Editors' forum on the media, AU, NEPAD and Democracy, Johannesburg, 12 April, URL (consulted June 2003): [http://www.sanef.org.za/default.asp?ID=73&subclick=yes&parent\\_id=42](http://www.sanef.org.za/default.asp?ID=73&subclick=yes&parent_id=42)

- McEwan, C. (2003) 'Material Geographies and Postcolonialism', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 24(3): 340–55.
- Moemeka, A.A. (1997) 'Communalistic Societies: Community and Self-Respect as African Values', in C. Christians and M. Traber (eds) *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, pp. 170–93. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nandy, A. (1987) *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Nerone, J.C. (ed.) (1995) *Last Rights: Revisiting Four Theories of the Press*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Nyamnjoh, F.B. (2005) *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Nyamnjoh, F. and Englund, H. (eds) (2004) *Rights and Politics of Recognition in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Parekh, B. (1989) *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Pillai, P. (1993) 'Reinterpreting the Margins of Theory', unpublished dissertation, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, MA.
- Rao, S. (1999) 'Woman-as-Symbol: The Intersections of Identity Politics, Gender, and Indian Nationalism', *Women's Studies International Forum* 22: 317–28.
- Roy, R. (1985) *Self and Society: A Study in Gandhian Thought*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sharma, S.R. (2001) *Gandhi: Ahimsa and Non Violence in Practice*. New Delhi: Cosmo.
- Shepperson, A. and Tomaselli, K. (2002) 'Ethics: A Radical Justice Approach', *Ecquid Novi* 23(2): 278–89.
- Shiva, V. (1989) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Shohat, E. and Stam, R. (2003) 'Introduction', in E. Shohat and R. Stam (eds) *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, pp. 1–18. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Shome, R. and Hegde, R. (2002a) 'Culture, Communication, and the Challenge of Globalization', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19(2): 172–89.
- Shome, R. and Hegde, R. (2002b) 'Postcolonial Approaches to Communication: Charting the Terrain, Engaging the Intersections', *Communication Theory* 12(3): 249–70.
- Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. (1974) *Four Theories of the Press*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Spivak, G. (1988) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Steenveld, L. (2004) 'Transforming the Media: A Cultural Approach', *Critical Arts* 18(1): 92–115.
- Tiffin, H. (1995) 'Postcolonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse', in B. Ashcroft et al. (eds) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, pp. 95–8. London: Routledge.
- Tomaselli, K. and Shepperson, A. (1997) 'Accepting the Other: On the Ethics of Intercultural Communication in Ethnographic Film', in C. Christians and M. Traber (eds) *Communication Ethics and Universal Values*, pp. 277–97. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ward, S.J. (2005) 'Philosophical Foundations for Global Journalism Ethics', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 20(1): 3–21.
- Wasserman, H. (2003) 'Post-Apartheid Media Debates and the Discourse of Identity', *Ecquid Novi* 24(2): 218–24.
- Wasserman, H. and De Beer, A. (2004) 'Covering HIV/AIDS: Towards a Heuristic

Comparison Between Communitarian and Utilitarian Ethics', *Communicatio* 30(2): 84–97.

Wolpert, S. (2001) *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Young, R.J. (2001) *Postcolonialism: An Introduction*. London: Blackwell.

### **Biographical notes**

---

**Shakuntala Rao** is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She has published numerous articles in communication and interdisciplinary journals such as *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Journal of International Communication*, *Howard Journal of Communication* and *Visual Communication Quarterly*.

*Address:* Department of Communication, State University of New York, 101 Broad Street, Plattsburgh, NY 12901, USA. [email: raos@plattsburgh.edu]

**Herman Wasserman** is Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. He is Editor of the South African journal *Ecquid Novi* and co-editor of *Shifting Selves: Post-Apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity* (Kwela, 2003).

*Address:* Department of Journalism, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa. [email: hwasser@sun.ac.za]

---