

Towards a Christian model for journalism¹

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Abstract

Towards a Christian model for journalism

While it is necessary to question the underlying presuppositions of the news media, it is not adequate merely to criticize or reject non-Christian models. However, little has been done to formulate a comprehensive Christian model for the media in general, or journalism in particular. In this article some outlines of a Christian model for journalism are suggested. It includes three basic principles as well as several sub-principles (or norms). It is argued that the suggested norms could be regarded as "news values". The general use of the term "news values" is thus rejected in order to protect the normative character of values. It is stressed that as journalism is not an "objective", value-free activity, all aspects of the ongoing selection process intrinsic to journalism ought to acquire a Christian flavour.

1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of modern media and its potential power to influence people's lives over time² necessitates constant vigilance over the media products daily consumed by millions. Of equal importance is the need to question the underlying presuppositions of the news media (i.e. the normative models underpinning the media). Media models therefore have to be subjected to fundamental analyses in order to expose underlying (hidden) assumptions. In this way the media models can be assessed thoroughly and the products of the media – news, interpretation/comment, education, and entertainment – can be better understood.

It is not adequate to merely criticize or reject models which are in conflict with one's own. As Christians we need to put forward our own model or models,

1 This article is based on a paper presented at the Scholarly Conference for Post-Graduate Students and Academics, National Institute for Christian Education, Sydney, Australia, 17-20 July 1996.

2 Most, if not all, authors on mass media refer to this fact and it has thus become a truism. It is, nevertheless, true. See e.g., Van Delden (1990), De Boer (1993), Hiebert *et al.* (1991).

thereby taking an unequivocal stand against other world views (cf. Schaeffer, 1982:136). This article proposes some outlines for a Christian model for journalism.

One has to note at the outset that a really useful model must be practical, easy to understand and, of course, well-grounded. Simultaneously, one has to take cognizance of the fact that although some Christians work for Christian publications, radio stations or TV channels, many Christians have to practise their craft/profession within a secular-humanist environment. This is even the case where the editors are Christians. The pernicious notion of “neutral” or “objective” journalism is often perpetuated by Christian editors.

Even though Christian journalism dates back to the previous century (cf. Kennedy, 1972:3; Puchinger, 1993:13-23; Van der Ros, 1993:25-69) and the hypocrisy of the so-called “neutral” journalism has been exposed decisively in recent times (cf. Van Velzen, 1990), the notions of “neutral” news and journalistic “objectivity” are often still taken for granted, e.g. in media codes.

While these notions are rejected in this article, it is accepted that truths uncovered in secular media models can be incorporated in a Christian model without necessarily compromising one’s own points of departure and slipping into syncretism (cf. Stoker, 1970:111; Lee, quoted by Kennedy, 1972:79).

2. Relevant questions

The following three basic questions seem particularly relevant to me if one is to formulate the outlines of a Reformed Christian model for the news media:

- What could be regarded as the main purpose of the news media?
- What Biblical principles and sub-principles (norms) exist for a Christian news media model?
- What implications do the above have for the ongoing selection process in which journalists are constantly engaged, in particular with regard to the crucial concept of news values, which ultimately determines what journalists regard as newsworthy and therefore publish/broadcast?

3. World views

The normative nature of the above questions is obvious. It is therefore necessary to note the role of world views in attempting to formulate answers to the said questions.

In this article it is assumed that all human activities are guided by underlying world views³. These world views, which are imbedded in our most fundamental religious beliefs, determine, inter alia, the kind of science we practise and the nature of the news media we produce. A world view therefore has practical implications (cf. Van der Walt, 1991:35-37; Stoker, 1967:28-31).

A Reformed Christian news media model presupposes the acceptance of God as the sovereign Creator of all creation. God reveals Himself through His Word – i.e. through Scripture, the Lord Jesus Christ and creation (cf. Van der Walt, 1991:50). This (theistic) religious point of departure implies that the word *God* serves as the “integrator word” that “unifies the conceptual (world view) scheme” (Holmes, 1985:33).

4. A Reformed Christian world view

Fundamental to a Reformed Christian world view is the acceptance of an integrated view of religion, i.e. that we have a calling to proclaim God’s Lordship and His Word in all spheres of life (thus rejecting the false dichotomy between “religion” and “ordinary life”) (cf. Veenstra, 1994; Calvin’s *Inst.* III,10,6). According to Holmes (1985:70), there can thus be “no legitimate division of life into the secular and sacred, no separation of fact and value, no divorcing of human purposes from God’s”.

Our Biblical views on creation, sin and redemption as well as those on the structure and direction of life (cf. Wolters, 1992) are, according to the Reformed world view, relevant and crucially important to our daily life, including our journalistic work (cf. Holmes, 1985:253). Van der Walt (1991:42) adds that it is liberating to realize that as a Reformational Christian, “one needs not reject or have contempt for creation if one wishes to be obedient to God and to serve Him ... We have to serve God in his creation”. Furthermore:

For that reason the core of the reformational world view is simple: our (whole) life is religion, service to God. We believe that man’s religious relation to God is total: it yeasts through everything that one does; it is radical: from out of a heart commitment it offers security to one’s entire existence, it is central: it offers direction and purposefulness to one’s whole life; it is integral: it binds together everything that one does to a meaningful whole (Van der Walt, 1991:43).

3 Van der Walt (1991:23) defines worldview as “an integrated, interpretive set of confessional perspectives on reality which underlies human activity, shapes it, motivates it and gives direction and meaning so that man’s calling in the world is spelled out”

5. A road map

When God's Word instructs us to be salt for the earth, we need to be so in e.g. journalism as well. And if we accept our calling to contribute to the kingdom of God by reforming the world (even in a small way), we need to work on reforming journalism as well⁴.

For this endeavour Christian journalists, however, need a road map – one which is sufficiently detailed, yet without confusing the ordinary user with superfluous information. As mass media encompasses so many divergent functions and forms (e.g. information and entertainment), this article will concentrate on the functions primarily performed by journalists, namely the gathering, processing and presentation of news as well as the interpretation of news and editorial comment.

6. The purpose of news media

The stated functions of journalists do not fully explain the purpose of journalism and the news media. It can only be formulated within, and by taking into full account, one's worldview.

With this in mind, we can state that the press/newspapers/news media are fundamentally the product of people acting on their God-given cultural mandate (Heyns, 1986:378, 379). However, to grasp the implications of this mandate, we need to acknowledge "man's aptitude for knowing, the fact that he is able to know or can function as a knower" as well as the fact that "man knows because all that has been entrusted to him is knowable" (Snyman, 1994:61; cf. Snyman, 1971).

On a very practical level we can state that we need to act, but need to know in order to act responsibly. We therefore are "duty bound to keep ourselves informed about the issues of our time". This is clearly a specific kind of knowledge, a knowledge about new, contingent, actual events – i.e. news.

It is the kind of knowledge that people need to orientate themselves to, and to find themselves at home in the world. This kind of knowledge confronts them with the need for making choices, making decisions, and the need to act. People cannot avoid these things if they want to fulfil their calling and actualize the possibilities of the world (Snyman, 1994:62; cf. Heyns, 1986:379).

⁴ Kennedy (1972) made a significant attempt at spelling out the implications of a radical Christian approach to mass communication, yet did not get around to formulating a concise model

If news, then, empowers people to make informed decisions and act responsibly, the purpose of news workers is to facilitate this process⁵.

7. Communication

Communication stands at the centre of all journalism (and other mass media functions) and is therefore of prime importance in the formulation of a Christian news media model. Suffice it to say here that human communication is a unique, mutually influencing process with built-in ethical implications (cf. Veenstra, 1994; Kraemer, 1957:11, 17). And if communication moves people, it influences them in a direction. Therefore, communication cannot be neutral. Likewise, journalism cannot be neutral: it influences people in one direction or the other.

This influence is brought about because journalists do not merely reflect reality in a neutral way, but create meaning while “making” news (cf. Tuchman, 1978:182-185; Van Velzen, 1990).

Against this background some outlines of a Reformed Christian model for journalism can now be drawn. In doing so, I fully recognise that this is, obviously, neither the first nor last word on this issue.

8. Outlines of a Christian media model⁶

God’s sovereignty is assumed and accepted as an overarching principle. This assumption implies, in first and last instance, that God must be honoured in all mass communication.

Furthermore, following in Veenstra’s footsteps, three basic principles can be formulated:

- Journalism, as a form of communication, is a God-given gift and has to be used with the necessary care and responsibility. As people were created in the image of God, journalism should foster (and not hinder) media users’ relationship with God and with other people (cf. Van Genderen & Velema, 1993:307, 308).

5 Heyns (1986 379) perhaps stresses the news media’s role of shaper of public opinion too much when he formulates the (sole ethical) purpose of the press as the creation of a responsible, well-informed public opinion, and eventual sympathy and support for the newspaper’s viewpoints

6 The first part of this scheme is not dissimilar to Veenstra’s tentative outline for a Christian ethical perspective for speech communication (1991) and a later update (1994) which concentrated more on a broad Christian perspective on communication. Although I arrived at the same scheme independently of Veenstra, his contribution and precedence are hereby acknowledged

- Man is a directional creature and continually influenced by journalism. This moral dimension implies that no piece of journalism should be seen in isolation from media users' lives at large (cf. Veenstra, 1994); it should help people to live according to God's Law and to fulfil their individual callings; it should "serve the knowledge and understanding interests of people so that they can orient themselves to a changing world" (Snyman, 1994:62).

Journalists should care for and afford full respect to all people, specifically those from whom information are obtained; those who are the subject of journalists reporting; and all readers, viewers and/or listeners. According to Veenstra (1994:82) "full respect is not based on what a person has done, but rather for who that person is as a created being. This person is respected because he or she is a religious being who carries some likeness to God, however distorted that likeness may be".

He adds that "the thrust of the second half of the Ten Commandments delineates the kinds of activities which fail to demonstrate full respects for other people" (Veenstra, 1994:82).

The above view correlates with Jesus' summary of God's greatest commandment: "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: 'You must love your fellow-man as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-39).

Several sub-principles or norms can now be deduced from the above. It has to be noted that the norms below are, in a sense, man-made ("gepositieerde norme" – Heyns, 1982:182-187). But, then, it is our God-given duty not to be fools, but to try and find out what God wants us to do (Eph. 5:17); our judgment must grow, together with love and knowledge, so that we will be able to choose what is best (Phil. 1:9,10). We have a duty to formulate specific norms in concrete, understandable terms.

In view of this injunction, I suggest the following norms for the different aspects of a journalist's work.

In gathering news, journalists ought to ...

- *Respect the privacy of people*, in particular their homes. This attitude excludes gaining entry to property by unlawful or deceitful means, or getting access to information unlawfully or deceitfully.
- *Strive to be comprehensive and "unbiased"* – the latter only in the sense that all possible angles should be investigated and a variety of different sources actively sought out in order to gain a rounded picture of, e.g., what happened.

This approach does not imply “neutral” or “objective” enquiries, but wants to stress the importance of finding all relevant facts and views, including those of Christians who have a special perspective to offer readers/listeners. Christian journalists do not know *a priori* what happened or what the complexities of a particular situation entail; they have to do as much (if not more) digging as any secular journalist in order to bring the full truth to light (cf. Calvin’s *Inst.* II,8,47; Heyns, 1973:227-237).

- *Take due care not to put their own lives in unnecessary danger.* While the work of journalists often entails reporting in dangerous areas or situations, “getting the story” is not the only consideration; one’s own safety should be given due importance (cf. Matt. 4:7; Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 50; Calvin’s *Inst.* II,8,40).

Journalists ought to provide the following:

- *Comprehensive news on all spheres and facets of life.* This aim implies that journalists should write about all spheres of life. “Nothing (meaning: no topic – JDF) is in and of itself taboo. It all depends on how the media treat such topics” (Snyman, 1994:66).
- *Timely news,* i.e. news which is still fresh enough to be usable by the reader/listener/watcher. However, this does not mean that all information has to be fresh to be useful.
- *Reliable, undistorted and accurate news.* This norm is found in most if not every media code (cf. South African media codes in *Ecquid Novi*, 15(1) 1994), but Christians accept that it flows forth from God’s commandment in Ex. 20:16). The Heidelberg Catechism explains this key commandment as meaning, inter alia, “That I bear false witness against no person; not falsify any person’s words; that I be no backbiter; that I be no slanderer” (cf. Froneman & De Beer, 1993:252). Furthermore:

... the legitimate observance of this precept consists in employing the tongue in the maintenance of truth, so as to promote both the good name and the prosperity of our neighbour. The equity of this is perfectly clear. For if a good name is more precious than riches, a man, in being robbed of his good name, is no less injured than if he were robbed of his goods ... (Calvin’s *Inst.* II,8,47, cf. Heyns, 1973:227-237).
- *Understandable news.* Unintelligible newswriting does not constitute caring for the reader. Therefore, Christians ought to write understandably in order to achieve their aim of serving readers with “the knowledge and understanding

interests of people so that they can orient themselves to a changing world and in this way fulfil their task” (Snyman, 1994:64).

- *Positive, uplifting news.* This aim is in contrast with the tenacious journalistic truism which holds that “good news is bad news” and “bad news is good news” (cf. Hartley, 1982:79; Righter, 1978:19) – an inclination which has drawn fire from many quarters (cf. Kussendrager, Van der Lugt & Rogmans, 1992:111). And rightly so. I believe God’s Word calls us to inspire people and to take heart.

But emphasizing positive news does not imply that we should support the development model’s enthusiasm for so-called “sunshine journalism” unequivocally. This stance is taken for under the positive exterior of the development model lurks an authoritarian disdain for any criticism of authority (cf. Hachten, 1992:35; McQuail, 1989:121; Righter, 1978:19). The imperative to publish positive, uplifting news also implies a duty to highlight positive developments, support educational, medical and other initiatives which will benefit the population at large.

- *Critical insights.* The previous sub-principle (or norm) does not imply that Christian journalists should be uncritical or subservient. They should report, analyse and comment on news in order to expose unbiblical practices and views. As such they ought to be critical voices without automatically accepting an “at-all-costs” adversarial role, relished by journalists bent on elevating aggressive investigative journalism to the only *summa bona* (“hoogste goed”).

Insight into the pervasive influence and devastating effects of sin in personal lives and society has to be provided without exposing victims and readers to sordid details and presenting the unacceptable abnormal (according to God’s Word) as desirable and normal (Heyns, 1986:389).

The above-stated principles and sub-principles (norms) are clearly idealistic, in the sense that they aspire to the kind of journalism God wants us to practise. This means, inter alia, that we offer ourselves (in Paul’s words to the Romans – 12:1, 2) “as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship you should offer. Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind”.

9. “News values”

The above sub-principles could well constitute the “news values” of a Christian model for journalism. However, journalism textbooks often identified “news

values” when listing news topics and/or factors and priorities influencing news selection. Harriss *et al.* (1992:27-33), for instance, state that “the qualifications or characteristics of news generally recognised by editors and reporters are known as news values”. These “values” are then listed as: conflict, progress and disaster, consequence, prominence, timeliness and proximity, novelty, human interest, sex, and miscellaneous values.

In other instances authors refer to “factors”, “gradients”, “elements” or “ingredients”. De Beer (1977:35) discusses these aspects under the same umbrella, namely news values (“nuuswaardes”). While his contribution is of specific importance (see next subsection), I believe it is necessary to clearly distinguish between values, news criteria and other factors, subjects/topics and priorities, in which case most of the so-called news values identified in relevant scholarly literature should rather be categorised and treated as criteria for newsworthiness (i.e. what is regarded as worthwhile publishing at a particular point in time and place) or even topics.

In so doing, the normative character of values or principles are protected, and a dilution of the term *values* prevented. This is of crucial importance if one is to argue against the notion of “objective”, “value-free” journalism.

10. Criteria for newsworthiness⁷ and influencing factors

Merely writing about the above-mentioned subjects does not constitute news writing. What then is news? The thesis of this article is that this question cannot be answered outside the realm of one’s world view and concomitant media model.

On the other hand one has to admit that a deontological approach which spells out principles and sub-principles (norms) regarding news gathering and writing does not, in itself, constitute an answer to the question either.

After analysing the “news values” in a number of textbooks (in which the terms “factors”, “gradients”, “elements” or “ingredients” were also employed), De Beer

⁷ News values and newsworthiness are sometimes used interchangeably, but I would suggest a clear distinction. *Value* refers to something important as well as standards, principles (Collins Pocket Reference English Dictionary). Furthermore, it suggests something of intrinsic worth (The Penguin English Dictionary). On the other hand, newsworthiness merely alludes to something sufficiently interesting or important (according to a specific editor at a particular point in time and place – JDF) to warrant reporting (Penguin and Collins). Using the term *news values* when referring to subjects, topics or diverse and factors influencing news selection is, to my mind, erroneous: news values and norms (or sub-principles) are on a par.

(1977:41-52) concluded that they could be categorised by two basic dimensions, namely distance and intensity (cf. Kussendrager *et al.*, 1992:108-110)

The first dimension (distance) has three elements: time, space and socio-psychological involvement. The dimension of intensity also has three elements: a change (or potential change) to the *status quo*, qualitative or quantitative magnitude and unusualness.

Likewise, Itule and Anderson (1991:40-45) concluded that the criteria for newsworthiness (note: not news values) include the following: timeliness, proximity, conflict, eminence and prominence, consequence and impact, as well as human interest.

While these summaries and categorisations are very useful in understanding what are generally recognised from a Western, commercial perspective as the elements (determinants and components – cf. Wolseley & Campbell, quoted by De Beer, 1977:37) of news, they do not spell out real values or even definitive criteria (cf. Hiebert *et al.*, 1991:413).

What these categories do is to describe the factors which are of more or less importance to journalists depending on, *inter alia*, one's media model. The audience, editors' preferences and other contextual factors will also come into the equation (cf. Nel, 1994:10-13).

Itule and Anderson (1991:45-51) summarise a number of important factors affecting news treatment which add an important perspective to any answer to the question 'What is news?' These important factors include the following:

- Instincts of editors and reporters. They often rely on "gut instinct and common sense".
- The diversity of audiences. Successful editors make it their job to know their audiences.
- News holes. The available space for news determines (to a large extent) what copy will be published and/or how much will be cut.
- Availability of news. News that "would not merit publication on relatively brisk news days might make their way into print" on another day.
- Philosophy of the medium. This factor, which is somewhat underplayed by Itule and Anderson, speaks for itself and is, in terms of the model proposed in this article, of prime importance.

- Pressure from the publisher. Although editors will usually deny being dictated to by the publisher/owner/chairman of the board, pressure can be exerted subtly or, in other cases, directly – with the danger of being fired clearly present.
- Influence of advertisers. Newspapers may not easily give in to blackmail, but the (“reasonable”) wishes of an important advertiser cannot always be ignored (cf. Froneman & De Beer, 1993:262).
- Competition among media. Media people monitor each other in order to get a competitive edge or to ensure that they are not left behind (cf. Kussendrager, *et al.*, 1992:112). This competition also means that local newspapers will, for example, publish news regarded as unimportant by larger papers.

In view of the above, it is clear that news cannot be described “objectively” in a definitive way; it is not merely a mirror of society, but it does “present to society a mirror of its concerns and interests” (Tuchman, 1978:183, 209). The definition of news depends on the social structure and the activities of newswriters and news organizations. Neither is value-free.

In the final analysis the real news values/sub-principles/norms of a newspaper can only be deduced from taking an all-encompassing view of all facets of what is published and why. This will thus include looking at the prominence given to topics and priorities afforded to individual items.

11. Topics/subjects

No limitations should be placed on which topics or subjects Christians may or may not address in the news media. These topics may include: politics, the church, economics and business, sport, arts and culture, entertainment, general human interest, sex, education, technology, war and other conflicts, agriculture, development and disasters, etc.⁸

In contrast with the policy of the Dutch daily *Reformatisch Dagblad*, I specifically include sport and entertainment as legitimate topics which ought to be addressed – albeit in a distinctly different way as that generally found in secular media (cf. Heyns, 1986:401-407). I also include sex as a legitimate topic, but obviously with the same caveat stated above (cf. Heyns, 1986:152-175). Note also that sex is included here as a topic, in contrast with Harriss *et al.* (1992:32) who include sex in their list of “news values”.

⁸ An American survey found forty different general news categories in daily newspapers (Hicbert *et al.*, 1991:412)

12. Items

Specific news items on a publication's news list will obviously depend significantly on the events of the day. But then, not all news media are daily newspapers or radio stations which thrive on immediate news. Particularly soft news and features will tend not to be directly related to the hot news-of-the-day, but rather focus on the more human side of news and newsmakers or uncover trends often overlooked in the rush for the latest events-driven news.

The alternative opportunities for Christian media – even those in the quick-news business – are clear. Less so is the need to focus on immediate news which are in line with Christian values and priorities. But even in this regard the choice of items can and ought to be different from that of the secular news media.

13. Priorities and “weight”

Priority and prominence given to the above-mentioned topics and individual items will depend on the values/principles/sub-principles one adheres to as well as the factors stated above. In practice it will therefore differ from publication to publication, from program to program, from city to city, from country to country.

Although specific news events will obviously play an important role, decisions on the priority given to news items should not be taken exclusively on the commercial value (or some vague, “neutral” system of “news values”). Given the necessity of reporting on and interpreting trends, a Christian journalist/publication will give ample attention to news which is not necessarily directly related to sensational specific events.

One should take care to note that, as all spheres of life should be on the Christian media menu, it could be argued that the church should be given some special priority, at least more than what one would expect in secular media. This is so, but care should be taken that news and views on churches are not regarded as “Christian journalism” *per se*.

We need to take a broad view of God's kingdom and cultivate an integrated, holistic approach to what it encompasses. As Heyns (1972:51, 52) noted about God's kingdom: “God's rule and the obedience of his subjects are not only a future possibility, but a *present reality*.” Christian journalists should reflect this reality.

In the final analysis, journalism is about selection: deciding on which item to cover, who to assign to the story, whom to talk to, whom to quote, what to give priority to, which item to include and what prominence the item should receive (front page, big or small heading), how to formulate an accurate, interesting heading, how to crop a particular photograph and what to say in its caption

14. “Quality” vs “popular” press

So-called “quality” newspapers are often contrasted with “popular” newspapers. Is this a useful contrast and how does it fit into the present discussion?

Hiebert *et al.* (1991:415, 416) name objectivity (i.e. “factual reporting”, a “non-partisan role” for journalists), accuracy, and balance and fairness as criteria for determining the relative quality of news. It correlates to some extent with the sub-principles or norms listed earlier. Although factual reporting, accuracy, and balance and fairness are without doubt aspects of quality journalism (and therefore quality newspapers), I would suggest that it is not an adequate definition for “quality” newspapers and/or journalism (and was, presumably, not intended as such by the said authors).

We have to add criteria such as an earnest endeavour to keep readers informed about all important news, sober presentation, a non-parochial approach, independence and integrity, and solid, intellectual opinion pages (cf. Kussendrager *et al.*, 1992:20, 21; Van Gessel, 1990:15).

Christian papers which adhere to the above-mentioned sub-principles or norms, will as a matter of course adhere to these additional criteria. They will not, however, necessarily be in a financial position to employ a large, well-trained editorial staff (as suggested by Merrill & Fisher, and quoted by Kussendrager *et al.*, 1992:21).

However, all quality newspapers, whether they are Christian or not, will share a certain seriousness and will shun sensationalism and a preoccupation with trivial matters so typical of the “popular” press (cf. McQuail, 1989:13; Heyns, 1986:389). The real contrast is thus between serious and superficial newspapers, not between quality and popular newspapers. A quality newspaper can be popular – that is if popular means a newspaper with a large circulation. Papers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian* underscore this view.

It is also incorrect to suggest that newspapers which have a mixture of hard, serious news and more superficial news and entertainment cannot, by definition, be of good quality. Such a publication could certainly include quality writing, photographs and lay-out and be printed expertly.

It is furthermore erroneous to suggest that a newspaper which carries a reasonably large number of sport and entertainment pages is, by definition, a “popular” newspaper and thus excluded from the ranks of “quality” papers. The crucial question is: How does the paper write about sport and entertainment?

Furthermore: not all serious newspapers are necessarily well-written and well-produced. And they are often not popular, that is in terms of circulation.

Christian newspapers ought to strive to be serious quality papers in the true sense and to be read by as many as possible readers. Being bright and lively is no sin and will attract readers; being grey and boring is not good journalism, certainly not good Christian journalism. To succeed in a competitive world, it is imperative to be as popular as possible without compromising one's principles and norms.

It must be clearly understood that Christian newspapers (or other publications such as magazines) should be careful not to become, as a matter of course, elitist, i.e. catering for a small, select group of readers with high educational qualifications. Although this is a legitimate focus, it could more often than not exclude ordinary Christians who are not highly educated but are still concerned about the central contemporary.

Likewise, Christians working in the secular media should avoid acquiring an "elitist" label. They must concentrate on producing copy of substance, reports and articles which are thoroughly researched, well-written, lively, interesting and captivating – that is – copy which will attract readers and indicate the journalists' dedication to fulfil readers' legitimate information and entertainment needs.

15. Profitability

In order to survive, newspapers have to make profits or receive subsidies from another source. Dependency on an outside source or a sister publication, however, invariably compromises, at least to some extent, the independence of the subsidised publication. Christian publications must therefore preferably be profitable, and have a strong circulation (subscribers, if possible) and a healthy advertising income.

De Vries (s.a.) correctly points out that it is not excluded that a newspaper driven by an ideal to influence readers can also strive to make some profit. Maximising profits in a responsible manner is the only way, eventually, of securing the continued existence of any publication. It is, however, never the main or only goal, as with typical mass-circulation publications with one dominant motive, namely commercial success (cf. Christians *et al.*, 1993:86; Schillinger, 1989; McQuail, 1989:12, 13).

16. Receptive readers

Without receptive Christian readers – people who have a disdain for trivial newspapers and magazines – there is no market for Christian publications. In this regard the Netherlands, where a strong Christian newspaper culture has been fostered since the previous century, is an anomaly (cf. Van der Ros, 1993). At present there are a number of Christian dailies in the Netherlands.

In South Africa there are no Christian dailies. But this should be seen in perspective. The Afrikaans section of the population are mostly members of a church in the Reformed tradition, which should indicate a market for Christian publications. Historically Afrikaans newspapers were edited by Christians who ensured newspapers with a general Christian ethos and strong nationalist political views. The need for a specifically Christian newspaper therefore has never been seriously mooted.

Furthermore, South Africa's demographics (a huge country and relatively sparse population divided into many denominations and Christian traditions) makes it nearly inconceivable for a Christian daily or even weekly to survive.

There are, however, a few Christian monthly magazines, notably *Die Voorligter*, a modern, profitable publication of general interest published by the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk), as well as a few good church newspapers. And to this list could be added a few womens' magazines with Christian editors sensitive to their Christian readers' preferences.

But in view of the enormous success of *Huisgenoot* (Spies, 1992:364-368), a weekly magazine (filled with trivial and sensational items as well as some very newsy and well-written actuality articles), and the solid circulation performance of the only Afrikaans Sunday paper, *Rapport*, (with its preponderance of trivial and sensational stories), it is clear that the said Afrikaans readers from nominally Reformed background, overwhelmingly prefer not to read serious newspapers or magazines.

It is also clear that the public is not educated and sensitive enough to sustain an ongoing debate on media ethics or the quality of newspapers (Froneman, 1994). The critical faculty regarding the media is largely lacking, mainly due to little or no media education.

17. Journalism education

In order to shape the Christian mind via journalism, one needs more than a clear idea of what Christian journalism or even a receptive audience could/should entail. The crucial element is that Christian journalists who accept the challenge uphold biblical principles and Christian norms – whether they work for Christian or secular publications, radio stations and TV channels.

This approach implies that journalists have to be trained – at least in terms of a Reformed Christian worldview – to accept their cultural mandate by working, through grace, in healing and sanctifying nature. I concur with Van der Walt (1991:40-43) when he concludes that “reformational points to a transformational

world view which stands for a cultural perspective that calls for the renewal of individuals and the reformation of society according to God's revealed norms".

18. Conclusion

When a Christian strives to do the above-mentioned in the field of journalism, he/she will experience the opposition and ridicule reserved for strangers and refugees (cf. 1 Peter 2:11; Van Genderen & Velema, 1993:350, 351). Being members of another kingdom, God's kingdom, requires us to carry our cross (1 Peter 2:18-25; Calvin's *Inst.* III.8.1). As Bonhoeffer (1988:80) noted:

Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact it is a joy and a token of his grace.

This is the bad news; this is the heavenly good news.

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