

Ethics Before Profits in the News

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THE FINANCIAL COLLAPSE HAS HIGHLIGHTED A CRISIS IN THE MEDIA SECTOR WHERE TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES AND THE INTERNET ARE CREATING HAVOC WITH MEDIA MARKETS. IN 2008 TENS OF THOUSANDS OF JOBS IN TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM WERE LOST AS NEWSPAPERS AND MAJOR BROADCAST MEDIA CUT EDITORIAL BUDGETS AND CLOSED DOWN TITLES.

Even the iconic titles of world journalism – the *New York Times*, the BBC, *Le Monde*, *The Guardian* – have slashed jobs as owners have woken up to the reality that market models for mass media, particularly newspapers, have been broken by the Internet which is draining advertising and audience, the lifeblood of the industry. Newspapers are no longer a license to print money, and probably never will be again.

The recession has accelerated the process of decline in traditional media. In the United States the last months of 2008 saw dramatic changes with thousands of jobs lost every week. The Chicago Tribune Group announced that it faced bankruptcy. The *New York Times* sacked newsroom staff for the first time in its history. Major titles – the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* – looked set to fall. The *Christian Science Monitor* ended its days as a newspaper and moved to the Internet. In all 50,000 jobs were cut in the US alone.

In Europe and elsewhere in the first months of 2009 the spreading crisis took on a global dimension with major broadcasters and news companies announcing cuts. Even in the entertainment field, which has a reputation for providing much-needed escapism and light relief in hard times, cuts are on the agenda with Sony and other media conglomerates announcing cost-cutting measures and job losses.

In response, the International Federation of Journalists has launched a crisis information service for its

affiliates – Monitoring Change – which is providing a daily update on industry news and highlighting actions by unions at national level to counter cutbacks.

The reckless actions of Mecom, for instance, the newspaper conglomerate in Europe made up of 300 titles bought after borrowing huge sums of money to finance a buying spree, led unions in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark to develop a cross-border campaign. The company was forced to sell some of its most valuable acquisitions to meet debt repayment demands and there have been cuts across the group leading to protests from journalists and chief editors that quality journalism has been sacrificed in the process.

It is this concern about deteriorating standards that has also prompted the IFJ to launch a new global campaign, the Ethical Journalism Initiative.

The Initiative, backed by a dedicated website (www.ethicaljournalisminitiative.org) and an extensive book, *To Tell You the Truth*, has helped unions to focus on the need to protect journalism and news media in the context of the current crisis.

The Initiative has been launched at special conferences in the Middle East and Europe and further launches are planned in Africa, Latin America and Asia during 2009 and 2010.

The union movement has always had a love-hate relationship with the press, but the financial collapse and the information revolution inside journalism provide a fresh opportunity to



promote a new debate about the role of media in democratic society.

The big media conglomerates are still in place and, if anything, getting stronger as they scoop up smaller enterprises that are no longer viable, but the crisis has exposed how journalism, impoverished by reckless cost-cutting, has been reduced to an agenda of sensationalist, populist and celebrity-obsessed news.

At the heart of the ethics campaign are efforts to put quality media and journalism back on the national and international agenda. With the private sector increasingly unable to deliver pluralism and high standards of media content, there is widespread concern about the democratic deficit caused by the lack of access by citizens to reliable, useful and accurate information.

The Ethical Journalism Initiative is promoting new forms of public investment in media to maintain peoples' access to quality information. It is also calling for a renewal of public service values in media, a theme media unions say should be developed in a conference on strengthening public services across the world which is planned by the Council of Global Unions for next year.

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