

# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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# Journalistic objectivity and subjectivity in news reporting and news selection

John Hurst

*The lines get blurred in news choices based on audience interests or importance*

Objectivity in the practice of journalism is what the Australian Journalists' Association's Code of Ethics says it is. The first of the code's ten commandments states that journalists shall "report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all essential facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis". In a nutshell, then, objectivity is about reporting the news in a fair and balanced manner.

The other nine commandments are an elaboration of that fundamental moral tenet. However, although the code defines in general terms the way journalists should report the news, it says very little, except by implication, about what kinds of news they should or should not report. Admittedly, Clause Two states they shall not place "unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability" but nowhere is any guidance given as to what would be considered "unnecessary emphasis" in this context. Indeed, the code is packed with pious phraseology hinting at the need for fairness and balance but at no point attempts to define what is meant by those vague and elusive terms. Thus, what objective reporting means in practice is left largely to the commonsense and consciences of journalists to decide what to report. And if they are seen to err, their choices may become a matter for judgment by their peers on the AJA Judiciary Committees.

One school of thought asserts that the principal criterion for the selection of news should be the "interests" of the audience. Another view is that

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news should be selected primarily on the basis of its “importance” to the audience.

I would argue that neither is exclusively appropriate and that news consumers are best served if those in day-to-day control of the news selection process take into account what is “of interest to” AND what is “important to” their audience(s). The key question seems to be whether news and views are selected by reference to what the audience says is “of interest” and/or “of importance” or on the basis of arrogant assumptions about their “needs” and “wants”.

The reality is that editors often do weigh news in terms of its interest and importance to the audience and that “interesting” or “entertaining” news sometimes receives priority over “important” or “significant” news and, of course, vice versa. Nor are these terms exclusive of each other. News may be chosen because it is both interesting and important or may be seen to be significant because it is presented that way. Even news that seems boring at first glance can be made to seem interesting and important in the hands of accomplished journalists attuned to the tastes and needs of their readers, listeners and viewers.

There are dangers, it seems to me, in selecting news *solely* on the basis of what editors believe to be “of interest” or “of importance”. Firstly, one cannot be sure that market surveys are always a reliable measure of public needs and wants, or that even if they are, that the news selectors take sufficient notice of what those surveys contain. The collapse of some news organisations and the decline of others suggests that they have failed to supply or at the very least have misinterpreted audience needs and wants.

Secondly, the news media are far from being mere passive providers of public needs and wants. In a very real sense they actively create needs and wants, partly by promotion of news products and partly by setting the agenda for public consumption of news and views. If particular kinds of issues or events are given generous air time or newspaper space, they may easily be considered by the audience as particularly important. If other events and issues are ignored by the media, the audience may easily come to the conclusion that those matters are unimportant or, as they have not been told about them, they may have no way of judging their interest or importance. The central point is that arbitrary decisions by news selectors about what items should be used or not used are sometimes based only on their own subjective values and not always by reference to the needs and wants of the audience. As Hirsch and Gordon put it in *Newspaper Money*:

The real power is exercised in keeping items off the agenda, as every crafty bureaucrat — and parent — knows. The press has an important influence on the agenda. It alone is the judge of that elusive concept: news value. Those who dominate the selection process . . . make the best judgment they can of what interests and concerns their readers. In this judgment the press is inevitably influenced not only by what it knows about its readers, from their social class to their hobbies, but also by the ambience in

which journalists, and particularly editors and news editors, themselves move, both professionally and socially. This latter influence is often suspected of reinforcing the middle class and London-centred focus of the press. What the press does not write about or campaign about is certainly as important as its positive contribution, where it often simply reflects other forces in society. As an academic analyst has put it: “Broadly speaking, newspapers determine what we think *about* more than what we think”. So the question of which forces of society the press does not reflect, or reflects weakly, is crucial (1).

The argument about what news should be reported and how it should be reported depends not only on the nature of the target audience (whether, for instance, it is seen as “highbrow” or “low-brow”, or “working class” or “upwardly mobile lower middle class”) but also on what views are held about the functions of the media. As Mayer has pointed out, the most basic function of a news organisation, whether newspaper or broadcasting station, is to make a profit, for unless it can do that or can depend on some other means of support (such as private or government subsidy) it will be unable to perform other important functions. Seen in those terms, a news outlet is simply a business enterprise and its success is to be judged only on the basis of how well it fulfils the profit-making objective.

But as Mayer also points out, a news organisation is also seen as having certain duties to the public such as informing, educating and enlightening its readers, listeners or viewers and sometimes advocating social and political change. The survival or success of the organisation, it is argued, may depend on the extent to which it is able to reconcile the profit-making and public-service objectives (2).

In economic terms the safest approach may be to provide news on the basis of what is “of interest to” the public. But simply giving the audience what they seem to want poses several problems. Firstly, decisions about what kinds of news and views are of interest to people may be based on arrogant assumptions, guess-work or misinterpretation of market survey data rather than on careful assessment of their needs and wants and on regular feedback from the audience.

Secondly, it cannot be assumed that the interests of the audience will be satisfied if ownership of the media is concentrated in a few hands and the dwindling media outlets present an increasingly narrowing range of news and views. If the range of choices is limited, people may stop buying the products or they may put up for a while with unpalatable news and views or with pap. Thirdly, advertisers generally support only those media outlets whose target audiences have the purchasing power to buy their products. Without the lifeblood of advertising, news organisations cannot easily reflect the interests of large sections of the population who lack significant purchasing power.

Thus, a considerable proportion of the population — the unemployed,

the poor, the political, ethnic or religious minorities with unconventional tastes or views may be denied access to the mainstream media. Without access to media such minority interests cannot easily give expression to their views and thus are caught in the bind that they cannot easily influence the majority to treat them more sympathetically or at least more tolerantly. Still less can they press upon governments and other power centres the urgency of their needs. It may well be true that the interests of the majority of the audience have to be the paramount concern of the media.

But at the same time I think it should not be forgotten that democracy is said to be best served when the media give representative coverage to the interests and concerns of all significant sections of the community. The media cannot do that if, in the words of one journalist, they simply march to the loudest drum of the moment. They have the choice of merely staying abreast of or leading public taste and opinion.

Nevertheless, the proposition that news should be selected primarily on the basis of its "importance" to the community poses other, potentially more serious, problems. Whether those problems actually develop depends on who makes the decisions about what is important. If news items were selected on the basis of what the audience regarded as important, then the problem might not arise, though usually the preferred diet is a mixture of "hard" important news and "soft" entertaining news and views.

No, the problem arises when editors and news editors decide what news is important or unimportant without reference to what the audience might be thinking or saying about their needs. The attitude that "we know best what's good for the masses" smacks of snobbery and intellectual arrogance. It is a form of elitism that denies the legitimacy of other views and other needs. It is the kind of argument advanced by authoritarian governments that control and manipulate the media for their own rather than for public ends. It is the stuff of which propaganda is made.

Those who argue that news should be chosen on the basis of its importance to the public cannot all be dismissed as arrogant elitists. The main drift of their argument seems to be that the media should play an educative role rather than simply reflect current public interests, opinions and tastes. Further, they assert that the media should select news at least partly for its social usefulness rather than purely on the basis of its interest to the audience. They are far from being alone in those views. Indeed, the media often preach about their responsibility to educate as well as to inform and like to see themselves not merely as the reflectors of society's concerns but as the righters of wrongs and the agents of social and political change. Sometimes, indeed, they are, but generally they follow the safer road, occasionally leading but usually struggling to stay abreast of public opinions and tastes.

There are and always will be disagreement about whether editors and sub-editors can be objective in deciding what should be in the news. That will be so, irrespective of whether news is chosen on the basis of its

"importance" or the perceived "interests", of the audience. One school of thought is that the media should focus primarily on what is "of interest" to the public. Another view is that news should be "in the public interest", implying that the media should make judgments beforehand of the social and perhaps political usefulness of the news. It is, of course, true that news can be "of public interest" as well as "in the public interest" but it doesn't have to serve both ends. All semblance of journalistic objectivity disappears once it is asserted that the news must serve both ends.

Finally, and to reiterate, the principle of journalistic objectivity relates not only to the process of news selection but to the ways in which the news is reported. The most interesting or most important story of the week can be made to seem the dulllest or most insignificant according to the way it is treated. The editor's or the journalist's own talents and values, the influence of an advertiser, or pressure from the proprietor can all have an effect in shaping or reshaping the news.

The current debate deals largely with what news is chosen rather than the way it is reported. It says little about why, in the reporting and analysis of news, emphasis is given to some facts over others, or about the use made of pictures, headlines or value-laden phrases to colour different items of news. It says little about objectivity in the sense that the media should "accurately and fairly" reflect a range of different views. It does not deal with the issue of balance in the interpretation of news, nor even with the argument that journalists' opinions should be more clearly delineated from the news.

First, it has to be said that there will always be a case for subjectivity in journalism, whether it takes the form of the newspaper expressing an editorial opinion, or of news columnists or radio comperes sounding off about their pet likes or dislikes, or cartoonists tilting scornfully at the foibles of people in public life. Few would argue that journalists should confine themselves to the facts, and leave *all* the opinions to others. Nevertheless, journalists will frequently debate, and often disagree about, the proper place in print, radio and television for fact, interpretation and opinion.

Some of the traditionalists among editors argue that because comment and interpretation involve subjective judgments, they should be clearly separated from and distinguished from the news. Another view is that fact and interpretation go naturally together because interpretation involves an honest and fair appraisal of all the given facts. The purpose of interpretation, it is argued, is to explain the significance of the facts and to put them into proper context by giving the background to those facts — not to persuade readers or listeners to adopt one or another view about the facts. As one American teacher of journalism put it:

Interpretation is an objective (as objective as human judgment can be) judgment based on knowledge and appraisal of a situation . . . Opinion, on the other hand, is a subjective judgment and should be confined to the editorial pages of newspapers and distinctly labelled on television and radio broadcasts. To report

that Spiro Agnew attacks the press is news. To explain why Spiro Agnew makes the attack is explanation. To assert that Spiro Agnew is a 'radic-unlib' is opinion (3).

As plausible as these distinctions seem, they do not satisfy all journalists. The facts, they point out, are open to a variety of interpretations. And both the facts that are used and the interpretation that is applied to them could be used to support the writer's own prejudices or predilections to lead the audience in a particular direction. Once that happens, it is argued, interpretation has come perilously close to opinion. It is subjective, only more subtly so than the strident voice of the journalist who openly professes that he is putting a one-sided opinion. The "honest" interpretation, then, is said to be that which is in accord with all the known facts. The corollary of that is that "dishonest interpretation" is the result of misuse or distortion of the known facts.

Sometimes it becomes obvious that journalists are expressing their opinions as well as interpreting, irrespective of the pretense that they are presenting an "objective" point of view. At other times opinion is more subtly intruded. What they say or write seems at first glance to be balanced and fair but gradually they introduce their own view about what should be done about the problems they describe. How, then, are we to distinguish between an honest attempt at presenting a fair and balanced interpretation and an opinion put forward in the guise of interpretation? Rivers suggests that an editor should apply this test:

Does the writer reveal or imply his own view, his own preferences, his own opinions? If so, unless his stance is one on which there is nearly universal agreement — opposition, for example, to pollution, crime, and man-eating sharks — the story should be rewritten. The revision should not merely cloak the writer's prejudices but should also actually clarify and analyse, which may require rewriting by someone with a more disinterested point of view (4).

However, other commentators deny that it is possible for interpretation of the facts to be completely objective. As mentioned earlier, even decisions about story content are said to involve subjective and widely varying judgments, even within one newspaper or broadcasting station, about what the audience wants or needs to know. It follows, then, that interpretive writers must make even more highly subjective judgments, since they must decide not only what facts are important but which ones are of particular significance, and the manner in which they should be emphasised. In explaining the meaning, significance and possible consequences of events they do, in fact, come much closer to expressing their opinions than do news writers.

The general distinction between interpretation and opinion still holds, and comment pieces are sometimes labelled as such in newspapers or sign-posted in radio and television and thus separated from the news.

Nevertheless, it is now common practice in some newspapers and magazines for journalists to mingle fact, interpretation and opinion. This is especially true of magazines like *The Bulletin*, *Time* and the *Independent Monthly*, which take a long, hard, critical look at issues rather than focusing on "straight news".

Some journalists and news consumers regret this trend. What readers want, they say, is newspapers, not viewspapers. The fact is that they are getting both, and the media generally are now employing an increasing number of specialists to offer their audiences expert analysis of the news. The prevailing view seems to be not that the experts should be absolutely objective in the strictest sense, but that they should strive to be as fair-minded as possible and that their interpretive comments should be based on extensive knowledge or research into the issues involved.

Inevitably, opinions do tend to get mixed up with facts and interpretive writing. Nevertheless, I believe that the interpretive reporter should bear in mind that his or her main function is to explain and illuminate events, not to editorialise or lecture readers or listeners. Interpretation ought not to distort the facts. Still less should journalists' own deep-rooted prejudices or preconceived notions of the truth be allowed to assert themselves and blind them to the facts.

For all the striving to present the facts objectively, there will be times when journalists will be and should be subjective about the events they describe. Objectivity in journalism does not mean that journalists should distance themselves stoically from the feelings of others or that they should never give expression to their own feelings. The former television commentator, Gerald Stone, noted that the Vietnam War exposed one of the weaknesses of the objectivity ideal, just as it exposed the weaknesses of other ideals. He said:

Those of us who were in Vietnam know how impossible it was for any reporter to maintain serious coverage of the war for any length of time without finding himself drawn inexorably into one overview or another and eventually one side or another . . . Vietnam was also a good example of how rare in life it is that we can ever track down such a thing as truth or fact . . . Vietnam showed that a reporter following the ideal of playing it straight down the middle with no personal feelings intruding could produce at least as devastating distortions as the committed propagandist. Most of us would agree that the coverage of Vietnam distinctly improved as we got less and less of the so-called eye-witness colour reporting and press conferences and more and more of the interpretive and background pieces (5).

Having stated that, Stone maintains that objectivity is still worth striving for because, as he puts it:

If professionalism in journalism means anything, it means the ability of the journalist to recognise his personal leanings and his

ability to control them. If we accept the idea that a barrister can forego his dislikes and give a fair defence of a murderer . . . I do not think there is anything wrong with suggesting that a biased reporter can be trustworthy. Of course some reporters will be a little more trustworthy than others (6).

No intelligent journalist pretends that it is easy to be absolutely objective when reporting and interpreting the news. Objectivity in the sense of fairness means a great deal more than lack of bias. It means that the news that is selected and the way it is reported not only serve the broad wants and needs of the audience but that systematic, ongoing inquiries are made by the media about the nature of those needs. As a famous World War II American radio commentator, Elmer Davis, said:

The good newspaper, the good news broadcaster, must walk a tightrope between two great gulfs — on the one side the false objectivity that takes everything at face value and lets the public be imposed upon by the charlatan with the most brazen front; on the other, the 'interpretive' reporting which fails to draw the line between objective and subjective, between a reasonably well-established fact and what the reporter or editor wishes were fact. To say that is easy; to do it is hard (7).

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