

### Does objectivity in journalism exist?

*'It is a commonplace assumption of journalism that the media have a fundamental duty to be impartial in order to achieve the goal of an objective report or analysis of current events.'* (Kieran, 1998, p.23).

The recent Boxing Day natural and horrific disaster over in Asia, caused by an earthquake followed by a tsunami, seemed a prolific news event to focus on, to analyse journalism in terms of its alleged objective nature. All newspaper articles I draw upon are from Tuesday, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2005. This was about a week after the event itself, but the story still dominated the front pages and the majority of front sections in most newspapers. *'Major incidents are, by their very nature, chaotic.'* (Randall, 2000, p112).

*'News is seen as neither reflecting nor distorting any objective reality, but as a purely constructed discursive reality reflecting only routine practices.'* (Lau, 2004, p.696). This is an opinion shared by Tuchman (1978) *'It appears the word 'objectivity' is being used defensively as a strategic ritual.'* (p306). Lau, above suggests the routine practices of journalism construct a reality rather than reflect it, while Tuchman also focuses on these practices, choosing to call them 'strategic ritual'.

To gain a deeper insight into the structure codes of journalism, I looked at a couple of journalism handbooks. Hicks et al. (1999) book *Writing for Journalists* suggests that *'News is easy enough to define. To be news, something must be factual, new and interesting.'* (p11). There is however, a problem here, as to define something as these three categories, there has to be opinion and subjective ideas on what stories fit this classification. Thus, this surely suggests that even from the outset of writing news stories, there is a lack of objectivity present.

In *Writing for Journalists* (1999) there are guidelines on how to write news, which paradoxically do not mention objectivity at all. Instead they are concerned with news writers complying with the five Ws / Rudyard Kipling's six questions – who,

what, how, where, when and why. The News Pyramid is mentioned, a journalistic ritual for making sure the news story starts with the most important, essential information then ends with the less important facts. *'News is written so that readers can stop reading when they have satisfied their curiosity...'* (Hicks et al., 1999, p16).

*Writing for Journalists* (1999) also gives tips on the structure of a news story. Here again, no mention of objectivity, instead focusing on how to write the introduction, using quotes, bridges and links. This seems to be the same case in most journalism 'handbooks'. *The Universal Journalist* (2000, p142 – 160) also neglects to mention objectivity. They focus on planning, clarity, fresh language, honesty, precision, suitability and efficiency.

*'To journalists, like social scientists, the term 'objectivity' stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics. Attacked for a controversial presentation of 'facts'. Newspapermen invoke their objectivity almost the way a Mediterranean peasant might wear a clove of garlic around his neck to ward off evil spirits.'* (Tuchman, 1972, p297).

Tuchman is not writing a handbook for journalists, however she discusses many different ways in which the press structure their stories to give a false sense of objectivity. She talks of the need for supporting evidence, use of quotes and the structure of the news story where the facts are presented in the correct order of importance. Although Tuchman is writing in the seventies, her ideas are still very relevant today.

The use of quotes seemed an interesting first port of call to look at how the press try and come across as objective. The tsunami coverage was and still is an abyss of quotations and I wanted to analyse how they used opinions of others in their reports. This was in the same vain as Nylund (2003) used 9/11 press coverage to illustrate that the use of quotes is a major part of news story structure.

*'...News content revolves around the practice of quoting: the (co-)construction, selection, editing and representation of comments, explanations, interpretations,*

*speculations, praise and blame, among others. In short, news items are, to a large extent, 'talked into being'.* (Nylund, 2003, p844).

Nylund (2003) suggests the narrative features that are provided in news stories, through quotes, are: a confirmation of claims of newsworthiness (novelty, validity and public relevance), evaluation (for example, establishing large-scale problems), criticism and blame (providing conflict and drama), emotions (that cannot be expressed by the news reporter himself), subjective experiences, a sense of presence and validity (the reporter as 'being there') and 'solutions' to problems (the media and their sources as 'agents of change'). In my investigation of the British press on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2005, focusing on the tsunami coverage, I found examples of quotes being used in the aforementioned ways. Here are my examples.

### **Evaluation**

**The Sun:** (on death toll)

*'Grim-faced Mr. Straw said: "As many bodies may sadly never be found, firm estimates of casualty figures remain difficult."*

**The Times:** (from the Indonesian minister)

*"One dead body creates shock and depression. It is very important for us to be free of them, although it will take time."*

**The Guardian:** (Mr. Straw)

*'But he said that Foreign Office staff had dealt with a "very large number" of relatives and that overall they had responded "absolutely magnificently".'*

### **Criticism and blame**

**The Daily Mail:** (David David on Blair)

*"He is one person who can kickstart (sic) the solution and he should call a meeting, and get them together. He should do that immediately."*

**The Times:** (on credit card companies)

*'Save the Children, which has raised about £500,000, said "At the moment the credit card companies are still taking their cut but we are in talks to get them to waive it, it all adds up doesn't it?"'*

### Emotions

**The Sun:** (on the UK thieves stealing donations)

*'One senior cop said: "These people really are plumbing new depths. Stealing from charity is bad enough at the best of times, but when millions are in need it is beneath contempt."'*

**The Independent:**

By far the most quotes on this day. The front page was full of them, a photo and then a quote from different public figures. From comedian Bill Bailey to artist Dinos Chapman to former cabinet minister Tony Benn – all asked *'Could the tsunami disaster be a turning point for the world?'* *The Independent* had by far the most tsunami coverage on this day as well, weeks after the event, but still dominating the press as updated death toll figures roll in and new political decisions take place.

### Subjective experiences

*'...Subjective experiences that supply 'the view of the victim'.'* (Nylund, 2003, p845/6). This seems to be, unsurprisingly, the type of quote appearing most often in the press during the tsunami coverage. Here are a few examples.

**The Daily Express:** (survivor report)

*'Cherise said: "We spent an hour and a half helping people, bringing them water and putting bandages on them. There were thousands injured."'*

**The Telegraph:** (volunteer eye witness account)

*"I had to run away. I was catatonic. I can't believe what I have seen."*

**The Mirror:** (on the e-mail hoaxer)

*'Family friend Ruth Williamson said: "He must be really sick."'*

(Survivor account)

*'Dr Parameswary said: "I ran for my life, screaming and calling for help. I was terrified. We had to leave or die. We had no choice."'*

*'The newsmen view quotations of other people's opinions as a form of supporting evidence. By injecting someone else's opinions, they believe they are removing themselves from participation in the story, and they are letting the 'facts' speak.'* (Tuchman, 1978, p301.)

As well as the structure of news stories, journalists are also controlled by other factors. These have been discussed by many writers as the extraneous and internal factors. *'...two types: factors extraneous to journalists and internal factors deriving from journalists themselves within journalistic autonomy.'* (Lau, 2004, p693).

Thus, factors such as ownership, government regulations, technical and logistical factors, newspaper size and the like constitute extraneous factors. Factors such as professional journalistic practices, and ideologies and values held by journalists constitute internal factors deriving from journalists themselves. Values held by journalists surely illustrate the subjective nature of the profession.

*'Extraneous factors act as constraints on journalists, whereas internal factors exercise their effects within journalistic autonomy.'* (Lau, 2004, p695). Therefore, the structure of news stories – journalistic practice – as I have already discussed in terms of use of quotes, is part of the internal factors faced by journalists. Lau (2004) cites Epstein (1973) as saying that *'members of such organizations eventually modify their own personal values in accordance with the requisites of the organization'*. In order to make money for their writing, they may have to write in a way different to their own true opinions.

The British newspapers all have a well known political bias. The Conservative biased press includes broadsheets *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* and well as tabloid red-top *The Sun*. The Labour biased press includes broadsheets *The Independent* and *The Guardian* and well as red-top tabloid *The Daily Mirror*. The middle market tabloids, but mostly Conservative in opinion, are *The Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*.

This may explain why *The Independent* had abundant coverage of the tsunami compared to the rest of the press on the 4<sup>th</sup> January, as Blair seems to be in the bad books in the public eye for staying on holiday after the event, instead of coming back to try and help and start aid operations overseas. The press political bias would also explain David David's quote in the *Mail* about Blair (aforementioned). With such political bias in operation, it is hard to believe the notion of an objective journalist.

*'.....Different news reports might focus upon different aspects of a story because they are addressed to different concerns and audiences. But even news reports that speak to different concerns ought to cover the central aspects of an event which makes it a news story.'* (Kieran, 1998, p.30).

Kieran (1998) uses the example of how different press focused on different aspect of the O. J. Simpson trial. He suggests that the mainstream media gave him favorable treatment due to his star status, the black media focused on racial angles and the women's press seemed to concentrate on the wife beating allegations.

*'For over different newspapers, broadcast bulletins, individual journalists and the time-span of a story we seem to end up with divergent reports of the same event. The nature of an event, it is claimed, partly depends upon those who interpret it.'* (Kieran, 1998, p.24).

From the tsunami coverage, we can see that different papers have focused on different aspects, maybe in accordance to their political bias or the newspapers own opinions and values. (See Appendix A).

The death toll of UK citizens is the point focused on by the majority of the press on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2005. *The Telegraph*, *Express* and *Mail* all give a figure for the toll, but the *Mail* chooses 199 – the other two papers reporting 200 as the figure. Some inconsistencies on the exact number appear, as this is a very awkward detail to estimate when hundreds or more bodies are still unaccounted for.

*'The death toll...is often the key indicator of how big the story is, can often be slow to emerge. First reports if it can be particularly misleading.'*(Randall, 2000, p112).

*The Times* and *The Guardian* choose to leave out figures, due to the evident difficulty in giving a correct report, these papers instead state that the toll 'soars' instead. *The Sun* focuses on another aspect of the event, thieves plundering collections, where the *Mirror* focuses on the e-mail hoaxer. *The Mirror* and *The Sun*, as bottom end press, move away from the main issues of the story and pick out stories that the mass public can relate to, stories set in their own locale.

Another major part of press these days, is photographic portrayals of the news event. Tuchman (1972) would suggest this is all part of the supporting evidence factor of journalistic structure. Through photos, the journalist is letting the 'picture paint a thousand words' without putting his or her own opinions across. There were two photos used in multiple newspapers on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2005. It could be said these were the photos to sum up that days news of the aftermath of the disaster.

The first photo, that appeared in *The Mirror*, front page of *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *Daily Express*, is of the credit cards, passports and so on found in tsunami affected areas. They are separated into different bowls for each country, an eerie illustration of the loss of lives and those missing. The second most used photo this day was of Val Ledingham, who fell into the arms of a nurse after searching on a computer database for information about her son, Justin, 29. The information almost certainly suggested he was killed by the disaster. This photo appeared in *The Sun*, *The Telegraph*, *The Mirror* and on the front page of *The Times*.

The appearance of the same photos in multiple newspapers is due to the structure of the press industry, the reliance on 'photo library' organisations, instead of employing their own photographers. However, 'in-house' photographers are still used, as not all the newspapers use all the same photos.

There is scepticism of objective journalism, and then there is Baudrillard, who takes this notion a little too far. *'Infamously, at the time of the Gulf War, Baudrillard claimed that the war was only a media event.'* (Kieran, 1998, p.23). There was photographic evidence of this war, but still he believed it to be a media fictitious event. His trust in the press, and media as a whole, none existent.

Empirical evidence is another way in which journalists let the facts speak for themselves in an attempt to appear objective. *'...Given what may be regarded as modern-day people's naive empiricism, quantitative figures are commonly fetishized as being synonymous with objectivity.'* (Lau, 2004, p.705).

As we have already seen, the death toll figures feature in many of the newspaper headlines on the day I chose to analyse. As well as this, there were other forms of empirical evidence at play in the body of the newspapers.

#### **The Mirror:**

A small chart reporting UN toll at 140,000, split into affected countries: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Somalia and the Maldives.

#### **The Daily Mail:**

A diagram of how donated money pays for a mercy flight and a chart showing the worst disasters and the toll – suggesting the severity of each disaster.

#### **The Independent:**

Diagrams and charts covering multiple pages, showing how aid is getting to affected areas - how much and in what form.

Although there are all these journalistic practices in place to give an air of objectivity, I am still unconvinced. By human nature, it is hard to write on emotive

stories such as the tsunami without putting across some form of bias about how awful it is. They may use quotes to express their own ideas, or those of the newspaper and empirical evidence and photos also let the facts speak for themselves, yet this still does not cover up the subjective nature of journalists to my mind. It is well known that newspapers have political bias and their own agendas, so why this forced pressure for them to appear objective. They do not seem to be fooling anyone.

Five years into this new millennium, the news consumer seems to be taking matters into their own hands, and turning their backs on the traditional forms of journalism, the tangible newspaper may be on its last legs. *'... From undirected dissemination to a directed search for information. Increasingly, it is the receiver to whom the task of selection falls.'* (Bardoel, 1996, p381).

Bardoel (1996) suggests the new media formats of news will lead to two types of journalism. Orientating journalism, where background information and explanation are provided to the general public and instrumental journalism that provides functional and specialised information to interested news audiences.

*Time* magazine recently highlighted a fairly new occurrence in the world of news reporting. The weblog. A personal website that offers short, intense bursts of commentary and opinion, usually accompanied by a link to a news story elsewhere online. Some blogs are diaries; some focus on highly specific topics, like knitting, car repair or sex.

The *Time* magazine article focuses on one blog in particular – *Power Line*. This was set up in 2002, on Memorial Day weekend by an American lawyer named John Hinderaker. His colleague at the law firm, Scott Johnson also joined the blog as a writer soon after its set up. Except he was critical of the idea to start with, saying *'I think the idea that we could ever have any readers for this thing is a pathetic fantasy.'* The phrase "pathetic fantasy" is now a running gag among the Power Liners. (Kher, 2004, para. 5). A few months later this group grew further, as Washington based lawyer, Paul Mirengoff joined.

*'Before this year, blogs were a curiosity, a cult phenomenon, a faintly embarrassing hobby on the order of ham radio and stamp collecting. But in 2004, blogs unexpectedly vaulted into the pantheon of major media, alongside TV, radio and, yes, magazines, and it was Power Line, more than any other blog, that got them there.'* (Kher, 2004, para. 3).

In a time when news consumers want opinionated reporting, the weblog is taking off in a big way. Even *The Guardian* website now has its own online blog sites. *'Blogs tend to be biased and openly partisan in exactly the way most mainstream news sources aren't. Blogs aren't objective, and they don't pretend to be. When you read Power Line, you feel as if you're part of a community, a like-minded righteous few.'* (Kher, 2004, para. 9).

The tsunami has its own blog site. I wanted to see if any different stories were appearing there compared to the newspapers in this country. I found little difference, which surprised me. There were similar stories about the amount of aid needed, about the different countries aid donations, the hoax e-mail, child trafficking and so on. There were a few stories that I saw on the blog site that had not, as yet, seemed to appear in the newspapers (at time of writing though, these have now transpired to the press, interesting that these stories first appeared on a non-mainstream media form – the blog). These stories were about the Benefit Concert in New York and fishermen in Sri Lanka worrying that the fish they caught from the sea were fit for consumption.

When I checked back more recently on the tsunami blog, there seemed to be many more comments airing survivor opinions and accounts. As the shock of the disaster ebbs away slightly, the discussion of events and consequences begin to unravel. The topic of world debt payments being frozen for affected countries, while they get back on their feet, is a frequently mentioned aspect on this blog site now.

John Hinderaker, the founder of *Power Line* blog is quoted in Kher's article (2004) as saying *'The world is full of smart people who have information about every*

*imaginable topic, and until the Internet came along, there wasn't any practical way to put it together.'*

But now there is, and we seem to be moving to a time when journalism is no longer bound to the national, international press and televised coverage. We are in a move towards '*horizontal communication in society.*' (Bardoel, 1996, p381). Where we do not rely on the mass communication infrastructure, but make our own pieces of journalism where there are '*...No editors, no deadlines, no space constraints, no hassle and no waiting.*' (Kher, 2004, para. 5).