

Chapter 7

The Biased Truth: An Objective Perspective on Nonobjective News Reporting

Andre Nicholson

Middle Georgia State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Consumers of news should expect to consume reports, which are an accurate and unbiased reflection of local, national, and world events. However, due to limitations that affect the packaging and presentation of many news stories today, consumers may not be experiencing a true reflection of those issues. This exploratory study examined three genres of news for objectivity and bias in the reporting of news stores: local news, national news, and satire news. The study found that although local news reporters attempt to report news stories with an objective narrative, it is often the news story's subject that impedes the process of objectivity. National and satire news programs also lose their objectivity based on the narrative presented by the hosts of the program.

INTRODUCTION

It is practically impossible to tune into any national news station and not be bombarded with stories of a broken health care system, a do nothing Congressional body, and polarizing social movements that bring out some of the most visceral hate rhetoric that can be aired on cable television. Surprisingly, or possibly not so surprising, with just a few clicks on the remote control, the local stations are broadcasting neighborhood news laced with the latest crime, violence, and corruption. These stories are brought into homes through the perspective of broadcast journalists. But what role, if any, does the journalist play in reporting these stories through an objective lens to their viewers? The journalists' role begins and ends with reporting an unbiased version of the facts. Potter (2016) posits that the challenge and reality is that it is impossible for journalists to obtain objectivity in reporting.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8359-2.ch007

NEWS GENRES

This chapter addresses the objectivity in news reporting, or lack thereof, through an analysis of national, local, and entertainment news, which for this analysis can be categorized as comedy or satire. National news reaches a broad audience and focuses mostly on national events as well as world events. Local news is tailored to the city/county of its geographical location and offers reports on issues affecting those areas. Certain satire news programs or comedy shows, which are hosted by comedians, can be considered satirical in its format. These specific programs interject a humorous spin on current events, usually with a slanted view. It is important to examine these different genres of news to extrapolate how stories are being framed for viewer consumption. Also, what are the implications of news reports if viewers are not considering news stories with a media literate lens? The analysis critically examines the reporting patterns of journalists in these different genres of news reporting.

As gatekeepers of the information being broadcast to viewers, journalists hold a responsibility to report stories that offers the viewer the ability to come to his/her own conclusion based on the principles of a good news story – accuracy, fairness, and objectivity. The average media consumer tunes into these networks expecting reports to be crafted through an objective, unbiased frame. Journalists make inferences and offer conclusions on the events they report, but in doing so are they then placing their own personal bias on the story? Objectivity in news reporting can be defined as the reporting of facts through an unbiased frame. Bias for the purpose of this analysis is defined as the distortion, fabrication, or embellishment of a story in an effort to slant the report in one direction or the other.

Introductory news writing and reporting course students are taught that journalists search for the truth through accuracy, fairness, and objectivity. Reports that strive to incorporate these elements lend themselves to a fair and balanced story. Media consumers are then offered the opportunity to take a stance on events based on their analysis of the report. Depending on the consumers level of media literacy will determine how much agreement or disagreement they will have with the story.

The goal of this chapter is to have media consumers critically analyze how broadcast news anchors, of three different genres of news, report stories to their audience. The analysis does not attempt to understand the effects of the reports on consumers. Therefore, an audience analysis is not the focus of the study. The broader analysis examines how reporters frame the stories and does objectivity remain in the reporting? Throughout the chapter the author will pinpoint areas in which reporters and television personalities, who report on current events, make the news entertaining for viewers based on their perception of what is news and what needs to be reported. Media consumers are then left with the challenge of examining their viewing habits, through a media literate lens, based on the genre of news they consume.

BACKGROUND: NEWS MEDIA LITERACY

Being media literate requires people to critically analyze media messages with the goal of becoming informed media consumers (Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2004). Consumers have a variety of ways to access information and messages, either visually, textually or auditorially, and these messages are continuously being presented to audiences several times throughout any given day. How does one begin to navigate through the bombardment of messages? Becoming a critical consumer of these messages is difficult to do when information is coming left and right, therefore, making the deconstruction of messages a taunting task. Potter (2016) argues that since the rise of mass media, society has shifted from a time

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